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DUCHAMP'S READY-MADES: BEYOND THE DIALECTICS OF ART AND ANTI-ART

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ABSTRACT. This paper re-evaluates Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades in response to dialectical critiques which privileged their anti-artistic status as objects which transcended the processes of production, of manufacture and labour associated with the creation of works of art. It analyses Duchamp's play on the simulacral nature of the commodity in order to expose and counter the erosion of art by commercialization. I argue that the ready-made brings art face to face with the commodity as its mirror image in a strategic stand-off that cannot be resolved by simply privileging anti-art over art. Fuelled by the opposition of these terms, the ready-mades emerge as conceptual devices which demonstrate the impossibility of defining art by arresting its meanings.

Keywords: *art and commerce; commodity; dialectical critique; art and anti-art; consumption as production; artistic creativity; Duchamp*

Introduction

In an interview with Moira Roth in 1973, Robert Smithson (1938-1973) described Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) as a "spiritualist of Woolworth."[1] He ascribed to him a spiritual pursuit of the commonplace, since the ready-mades were commodities drawn from ordinary objects commercially available in dry goods or department stores.[2] Smithson claimed that there was no "viable dialectic" in Duchamp "because he is just using manufactured goods, transforming them into gold and mystifying them"—a sanctification of "alienated" objects that turned

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[1] See Moira Roth, "Robert Smithson on Duchamp: An Interview," in Joseph Masheck (ed.), *Marcel Duchamp: In Perspective*, Englewood, Prentice Hall, 1975, p. 135.

[2] For Karl Marx' foundational analysis of the commodity, see *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, New York, Vintage Books, 1976, Vol. 1, pp. 125-177.

them into "relics" of our post-industrial society.[3] He described the ready-mades as attempts to transcend the work process of manufacture and labour, rendering the artist akin to "a priest or alchemist of sorts," who had turned a "urinal into a baptismal font."[4] Smithson claimed that Duchamp was merely trading on and mystifying alienated objects, amounting to a form of speculation that reaffirmed commodification along with the structure and institutions of art.[5] In his influential *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), Peter Bürger noted that in challenging the individual creation of unique works, the ready-mades represented an act of provocation, a negation of the institutions of art that took the place of the work.[6] While recognizing that Dada acts of provocation might not be reducible to a conventional understanding of work, he claimed that the danger lay less in the liquidation of the "category of work" (à la Smithson) than in its far more serious consequence, namely the "liquidation of art as an activity that is split off from the praxis of life."[7] Bürger's anxiety was focused on the erosion of the distinction between art works and ordinary objects as a space (or "distance") that would preserve the possibility of a dialectical critique based on their opposition.

Taking Smithson's and Bürger's concerns as a point of departure, this paper will explore the "work" that the ready-mades perform in moving away from notions of material manufacture and toward conceptual interventions.[8] The question is whether the ready-mades can successfully challenge through simulation the dialectical opposition of art and anti-art without falling prey to negation and merely reinforcing the category of art. My discussion is limited to a few key ready-mades that help elucidate Duchamp's initial elaboration of these works during 1913-1921, and his later reissue of selected ready-mades in the early 1960's. Rather than succumbing to the lure of the commodity as relic, this analysis shows that Duchamp's ready-mades mobilize the commodity by coupling it to the idea of art, in order to redefine their interplay as a dynamic device that will test and ultimately contest the idea of art.

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[3] Roth, "Robert Smithson on Duchamp," pp. 136-137.

[4] Ibid. For a comprehensive account of the history and aesthetics of *Fountain* in its 1917 context, see William A. Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp: Fountain*, Houston, The Menil Collection and Houston Fine Press, 1989, pp. 13-60.

[5] See Sven Lütticken's assessment of Smithson's position on the ready-mades in the 1960's in "Art and Thingness, Part I: Breton's Ball and Duchamp's Carrot," in *e-flux journal*, no. 13, 2010, pp. 2-3.

[6] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

[7] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 56.

[8] Smithson's and Bürger's critiques regarding the erosion of the distinction between art works and everyday objects reprised arguments levied during the 1950's and 1960's by artists and critics such as Barnett Newman and Clement Greenberg; see Lütticken's account of their positions in "Art and Thingness, Part I," pp. 1-2.

The Development of the Ready-mades

Starting in 1913 in Paris, Duchamp's development of the ready-mades continued through his arrival in New York in 1915 when he stopped painting altogether. His experiments resulted in the first public exhibition of three ready-mades at the Gallery Bourgeois in New York in 1916, where the public failed to recognize them as actual works. Duchamp's transitions during this period reflected his rejection of the pictorial dogmas of cubism, his recognition of the increased commodification of art, and the build-up and onset of World War I. Duchamp explicitly commented on the corrosive impact of market and speculative considerations on artists and their works: "The feeling about the 'market' here is so disgusting that you never hear any more of a thought for itself--Painters and Paintings go up and down like Wall Street stock."[9] Reacting against the increasing impact of commercial forces on artistic production, he was searching for alternatives to conventional drawing and painting. He began work on projects leading to *The Large Glass* and became a librarian in the "Perspective" section at the Bibliothèque St. Geneviève in Paris, thus putting an end to his pictorial and professional endeavours: "I wasn't trying to make paintings, or to sell any."[10] The ready-mades will be examined as an interrogation of art in response to the forces of commodification endemic to their fate as objects of visual consumption. I argue that the ready-mades inaugurate a decisive shift from capitalizing on the object's visual appearance or "look," as painting had done, to exposing and displaying its modes of public consumption and institutional presentation.[11] Diagnosing art's loss of visual interest by standing in for it as commodities, the ready-mades emerge as dynamic devices fuelled by their verbal and conceptual engagements with the ideas and institutions of art.

In explaining his selection of ready-mades, Duchamp cautioned against choosing them on the basis of their "look," since their visual appearance would sooner or later be recouped under the aegis of taste.[12] As a case in point, he referred to the aesthetic recovery of *Bottle-Rack* (1914) as a sculptural form.[13] He described

[9] Letter to Alfred Steiglitz, July 2, 1928 in Francis M. Naumann and Hector Obalk (eds.), *Affectionately, Marcel*, Ghent and Amsterdam, Ludion Press, 2000, pp. 43-44.

[10] See Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, London, Da Capo Press, 1987, p., 41.

[11] For an analysis of modes of exhibition presentation and display and their implications for the meaning of the work of art, see Thierry de Duve, *Look, 100 Years of Contemporary Art*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, Ghent-Amsterdam, Ludion, 2001, pp. 19-39.

[12] Duchamp recognized the danger in choosing too many ready-mades and thus veering off into taste; see his interview with Calvin Tomkins quoted in *Duchamp: A Biography*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1996, p. 427.

[13] Robert Motherwell singled out the bottle-rack's "more beautiful form" when compared to other sculptural objects of its time; see *Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, New York, Wittenborn, 1951, p. xviii. Also see Lars Blunck's discussion in *Marcel Duchamp, Porte–Bouteilles*, Nuremberg, Verlag für Moderne Kunst and Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp, 2014, p. 72.

the choice of the ready-made as enabling him to "reduce the idea of aesthetic consideration to the choice of the mind, not the ability or the cleverness of the hand."[14] His critique of the "retinal" aspects of art reflected his unease with painting as a visual medium subject to the forces of consumption. According to Duchamp, the label *ready-made* seemed perfect for "these things that weren't works of art, that weren't sketches, and to which no art terms apply."[15] These ordinary objects to which no art terms apply mark Duchamp's paradoxical abandonment of art objects as visual, manually produced artefacts in order to reclaim their verbal and conceptual potential as devices which serve to challenge the idea of art.[16] Take for instance, the ready-made *Bottle-Rack* (*Porte-bouteilles,* 1914, galvanized iron, original lost; dimensions not recorded, inscription unknown; also known as *Egouttoir* or *Hérisson* in Fr.), which was purchased at Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville in Paris or a dry goods store. Duchamp undermines the object's utilitarian function as a commodity by putting it on display. According to Calvin Tomkins, bottle-racks were commonly used as a measure of thrift to enable re-use of old glass bottles by filling them with new wine from a barrel.[17] Duchamp appropriates and redeploys the bottle rack as measure of thrift, suspending and disabling its use and as a result, its economic potential as a commodity. But in re-using the bottle rack for exhibition display, he capitalized on its economic loss by parlaying it into the gains it would accrue when taking up the position of an art object.

The suspension of bottles on the bottle-rack figures the condition of painting as a material medium which evolves from its condition as wet pigment once hanged up to dry. Duchamp described his efforts to move beyond the "splashing of paint" as an attempt to arrive through mechanical drawing at a "dry" conception of art.[18] The bottle-rack's other titles *Égouttoir* and *Hérisson* further expand the work's conceptual horizon through a play of puns. While referring to the draining–rack, *Égouttoir* also alludes through puns to sewers (*égouts*) and to the idea of taste (*goût*). Duchamp playfully deploys these verbal associations so as to drag the idea of taste (*goût*) through the sewers (é*gouts*) by flushing it down the drain (*l'égouttoir*). The bottle-rack's additional designation as *Hérisson,* which signifies a hedgehog's quills, or a barbed obstacle used in war, humorously alludes to the object's prickly appearance in order to highlight its latent violence in taking barbs at the idea of art. While mimicking sculpture, this commercial item actively takes on the ideas and aspirations of painting

[14] Unpublished interview with Harriet, Sidney and Carroll Janis in 1953, quoted in Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine (eds.), *Marcel Duchamp*, New York, Museum of Modern Art; Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973, p. 275.

[15] Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 48.

[16] For an analysis of ready-mades as verbal and visual puns, see my *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit*, Los Angeles and Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995, pp. 75-119.

[17] Tomkins, *Marcel Duchamp*, p. 135.

[18] Francis Roberts, Interview with Marcel Duchamp, "I Propose to Strain the Laws of Physics," in *Art News*, 67 no. 8, December 1968, p. 63.

and art only to challenge them in turn. Acting like a *portmanteau* (a verbal construction that packs two meanings in one word), the bottle-rack (*Porte-bouteilles*, in Fr.*)* emerges as a moving door, a device which acts as a gateway facilitating movement between the commodity and the art object. Rather than passively bearing bottles, the bottle rack activates and sets into motion verbal and conceptual associations which work to question the idea of art. Duchamp's use of the commodity to critique the idea of painting is explicitly spelled out in another ready-made, *Comb* (1916; grey steel dog comb inscribed on the side; Philadelphia Museum of Art). While literally referring to the comb on display, the title *Comb* also puns on the idea of Duchamp's supposed abandonment of painting, since in French the word for comb (*peigne*) is the subjunctive form of the verb "to paint*" (peindre)*, and it means I ought to or should paint. The dog comb as a commodity marks Duchamp's refraining from painting as a physical act, a suspension of activities designed to encourage a mental engagement with painting.

The ready-made's French title *Peigne* thus marks Duchamp's conceptual intervention, since the ready-made as exact replica draws on the aspirations of pictorial mimesis while confronting the viewer with its commodity counterpart in which the artist has no hand at all. The inscription on the comb's edge playfully sums up this authorial dilemma: "3 OU 4 GOUTTES DE HAUTEUR N'ONT RIEN A FAIRE AVEC LA SAUVAGERIE." Duchamp redeploys the commodity in order to question the authority of art and its maker ("*3 OU 4 GOUTTES DE HAUTEUR;"* or 3 or 4 Drops of Authorship or Odor): a minimal infusion of authorship which while not reducible to savagery does not amount to making art. Despite the ready-mades' lack of visual interest, their putative aspirations to conditions of display as art would put the idea of art to the test, raising the fundamental question of what art is when "looks" no longer count. Strategically deploying the commodity to challenge and ultimately check-mate art's modes of production and consumption, the ready-mades open up the possibility of art's conceptual redefinition beyond its visual manifestations.

Duchamp's dismissal of the "retinal" marked both his ostensible abandonment of painting as visual expression and his critique of the art object as a commodity. When asked by Philippe Collin how a readymade should be looked at, Duchamp answered:

> It should not be looked at, in the end. It is simply there; one has the notion by the eyes that it exists. But one does not contemplate it like a picture. The idea of contemplation disappears completely. Simply take note that it's a bottle rack, or that it's a bottle rack that has changed its destination.... It's not the visual question of the readymade that counts; it's the fact that it exists even.[19]

[19] Jacques Caumont and Jennifer Gough-Cooper, "Marcel Duchamp: Work and Life / Ephemerides on and about Marcel Duchamp and Rrose Selavy 1887-1968," in *Marcel Duchamp: Work and Life*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1993, n.p. entry: June 21, 1967.

By insisting that it is not the visual question of the readymade that counts, but the fact of its existence, Duchamp undermined traditional aesthetics founded on the production of visually and formally pleasing objects and on their consumption as artefacts worthy of contemplation. By becoming subject to market forces through public consumption, circulation and exchange, the fate of art works had ceased to be visibly different from that of articles of ordinary commerce. The fact that the work of art had now become a commonplace product like soap and securities implied that art in the modern age had lost its autonomy, that is, its ability to maintain its independence from the economic sphere.[20] If art lost its immunity to commerce and thus the ability to be distinguished from it, what would prevent its becoming obsolete, subject to abandonment or even possible extinction? This is the question that Duchamp's ready-mades raised, not by going back to an idea of an art before the emergence of the commodity, but rather by treating the commodity as the embodiment of one of the defining dilemmas of modernity, namely the erosion of art's visual character through public consumption.

In his notorious *Fountain* (1917; original lost, Philadelphia Museum of Art), Duchamp took a porcelain urinal rotated on its back, set it on a pedestal, signed it using the pseudonym "R. Mutt" and sent it for exhibition to the Society of Independent Artists in New York.

Unlike his previous ready-mades, this commodity item which Duchamp proposed for exhibition was far from being visually or aesthetically "indifferent." Its "suppression" (to use Duchamp's term) in being denied exhibition display reflected the hanging jury's consensus regarding its usefulness in its allotted place, as opposed to an art exhibition where its display would invite unwelcome associations with the idea of art.[21] Deliberately kept out of public view due to its connections with male bodily functions, the urinal's display confronts the viewer with the embodied and gendered reality of his or her body.[22] This work strips the spectator bare of the illusions of detachment and distance conventionally associated with the contemplation of art. By putting forward an article of plumbing for exhibition that had been denied public display due to its private function, Duchamp seemed to be mimicking and also inverting the social and institutional conventions at stake in the definition of art. Was this merely an instance of gratuitous play, or did it serve to further elucidate the nature of the ready-mades? A closer look at *Fountain* reveals the importance played by rotation and inversion in the physical, verbal and conceptual implications of this work. The

[20] Bürger questions the desirability of the sublation of the autonomy status of art, since he argues that the distance between art and praxis is a requisite for the elaboration of critical alternatives; see his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 53-54.

[21] Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp*, p. 27.

[22] For an analysis of the urinal in terms of mechanical reproduction and gender issues, see my *Unpacking Duchamp*, pp. 124-135.

urinal's physical rotation undermines its use as a receptacle, while its verbal designation as "Fountain" inverts its function by assigning it an active role as a device for splashing waterworks. This rotation de-activated the urinal's use and thus its value as a commodity, and brought it into position to question the values attached to the work of art. Subverting the use value of the commodity by augmenting its exhibition value, *Fountain* emerges as a speculative device that mobilizes exchange value in order to reveal through inversion the conventions which determine the idea of art. *Fountain* shows that a plumbing fixture defined by its associations with bodily refuse can become a gold mine, continuing to accrue interest and monetary value by mobilizing the speculative market forces involved in the public consumption of art. Duchamp redeploys the commodity by bringing it face to face with its "artistic" counterpart as its mirror image: his strategy of duplication marks the erosion of the concept of value as an inherent property of the work of art and reveals the expenditure of value through reproduction and circulation.

Re-issued Ready-Mades: "Mirrorical Returns"

In 1964, Duchamp, with the help of Arturo Schwarz, reissued *Fountain* along with thirteen other ready-mades in a limited edition series of eight copies. Although accepted as a common practice in printmaking and photography, this gesture shocked some admirers and critics alike, since it was seen as a sign of Duchamp selling out.[23] It seemed that he had finally succumbed to the market and commercial pressures he had challenged throughout his life. He was cashing in on his ready-mades and commodifying his artistic persona as signatory and backer of these works. However, the re-issue of these ready-mades represents more than a mere attempt to further legitimate and commodify these ground-breaking works. Indeed, the production of these ready-mades required extensive artisanal and mechanical handiwork to generate prototypes made to look like the "original" commodities which had become obsolete over time. Moreover, the context of the re-issue of the ready-mades must be kept in mind, namely that Duchamp had already undertaken the reproduction of his art works along with a few ready-mades in miniature in his *Box in a Valise*.[24] The early 1960's was also a period

[23] John Cage observed that to some, Duchamp's activities looked "like business rather than art." See Moira Roth and William Roth, "John Cage on Marcel Duchamp: An Interview," in Joseph Masheck (ed.), *Marcel Duchamp in Perspective*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1975, p. 156.

[24] Duchamp finished assembling *The Box in a Valise* in 1941 and he supervised its production in seven edition series from 1941-1968; see Ecke Bonck's influential analysis of this work's production and multiple iterations in *Marcel Duchamp: The Box in a Valise,* trans. David Britt, New York, Rizzoli, 1989, pp. 257-301.

marked by renewed interest and exhibitions of his works, most notably Duchamp's first solo retrospective at the age of 76.[25] His exhibition of the ready-mades in the context of a retrospective of his works invited concerted reflection and re-assessment of their critical importance not just on Duchamp's part, but on the spectator's as well, for as Calvin Tomkins noted: "There had never been an exhibition quite like this before, with so little to please and flatter the eye and so much to occupy the mind."[26]

Duchamp's reissue of the ready-mades was accompanied by the production of a catalogue entitled *Marcel Duchamp. Ready-mades, etc. (1913-1964*) (1964, The Menil Collection) for an exhibition held at Galleria Schwarz in Milan in 1964.[27] Designed by Duchamp, the book cover which looks like a photographic negative (white printed on black) duplicated his ink drawing of Steiglitz's photograph of the lost original *Fountain*. As if to underline the importance of this work, Duchamp produced a copper plate for etchings entitled *Mirrorical Return* (1964, The Menil Collection, Houston), which reproduced his previous 1964 Fountain drawing (based on Stieglitz' photograph) and the 1964 book cover. Duchamp's reliance on a strategy that reproduces a drawing of *Fountain* by duplicating Steiglitz's photograph of the lost original in order to produce an "original copy" in limited edition emphasizes the importance of the "mirror" as a figure for the duplicative logic of this work. Duchamp's etching, *Mirrorical Return*, which is a mirror image of the etching plate prepared in reverse, spells out the logic of simulation set into motion by the ready-mades.[28] Namely, it elucidates the dynamic principles at work in Duchamp's juxtaposition of the simulacrum with its ostensible artistic counterpart in a process which entails mirror-like duplication and inversion. In holding up a mirror to the work of art, the commodity emerges as its "mirrorical return," since what it reflects back can longer be associated with conventional notions of labour.[29] The etching's playful yet cryptic title on the top, "AN ORIGINAL REVOLUTIONARY FAUCET"/ "MIRRORICAL RETURN," and the caption on the bottom,

[25] Entitled "By or of Marcel Duchamp or Rrose Sélavy," this exhibition was organized by Walter Hopps at The Pasadena Museum of Art in October in 1963. Duchamp worked closely with Hopps on all aspects of the exhibition, including installation of the galleries and placement of the ready-mades; see Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp,* p. 109.

[26] Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography*, p. 422.

[27] Walter Hopps, Ulf Linde, and Arturo Schwarz, *Marcel Duchamp. Ready-mades, etc. (1913-1964*), Milan and Paris, Galleria Schwarz and Le Terrain Vague, Paris, 1964.

[28] See Jean Baudrillard's analysis of simulation in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor,
University of Michigan Press, 1994.

[29] For an analysis of the mirror status of the commodity, see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York and London, Routledge, 1994, p. 155.

"A FAUCET THAT STOPS DRIPPING WHEN NOBODY IS LISTENING TO IT," suggest that *Fountain* is a faucet rather than a receptacle, that is a device rather than an object. For it to work, it must be turned on by the viewer so that it can switch back and forth between its conditions as commodity and/or as art.[30]

"Mirrorical Return" thus emerges as Duchamp's ingenious solution to the erosion of art by visual consumption, one that does not fall prey to the denial or negation of art that would simply reinforce its definition. As Duchamp observed: "No, no the word 'anti' annoys me a little, because whether you are anti or for, it's two sides of the same thing."[31] Proclaiming anti-art or shock for their sake or as a publicity or celebrity-seeking device risked falling back into the idea of art that one sought to challenge in the first place. Octavio Paz had cautioned against the common error of mistaking the readymade for art, since when one did so it would lose its edge and thus its capacity to challenge the definition of art: "The Readymade is a two-edged weapon: if it is transformed into a work of art, it spoils the gesture of desecration; if it preserves its neutrality, it converts the gesture itself into a work."[32] He pointed out the fact that the readymade cannot simply be reclaimed as art and still retain the capacity to not only counter, but also challenge this opposition. Resisting the temptation of dialectics to valorise either the art object or the commodity and attempting to overcome their antithesis, Duchamp played on the opposition of these terms by turning this very opposition into a work in its own right. By coupling the commodity and the idea of art as reversible terms, the ready-mades dynamically stage their challenge to the idea of art. This may explain why Duchamp resisted the designation of ready-mades as art or as anti-art, in favour of a new term he coined, *anart*. But to what end?

Duchamp's development of the idea of "mirrorical-return" was followed by his appropriation of three commercial mirrors which he did not alter in any way other than by imposing his signature on the back.[33] The deceptive simplicity of this work, entitled *Three Mirrors* (1964), where Duchamp appears to have done nothing or almost nothing at all, has received no critical attention to date.[34] The fact that each mirror bears the stamp of its production number on the back

[30] This phrase is a verbal reproduction of one of Duchamp's cork-screw puns on disks, which rotated and alternated with optical disks in his film *Anemic Cinema* (1926).

[31] Francis Roberts, Interview with Marcel Duchamp, p. 62.

[32] Octavio Paz, *Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare,* trans. Rachel Phillips and Donald Gardner, New York, Seaver Books, 1978, p. 27.

[33] He made these works after visiting the installation of his friend Enrico Baj's exhibition of broken mirrors for the *Thirteenth Milan Triennial* in 1964; see Arturo Schwarz's account in *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, New York, Delano Greenidge Editions, 2000, p. 841.

[34] For a preliminary analysis of this work, see my *Drawing on Art: Duchamp and Company*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010, pp. 222-225.

alludes to the ready-mades as mass produced multiples. However, despite its apparent affinities with ready-mades, this work was not designated by Duchamp as such. Schwarz reported that upon signing the three mirrors, Duchamp remarked: "I am signing readymade future portraits."[35] Duchamp references the idea of the readymade not as a way of describing the status of the mirror as a mass produced object, but rather as way of designating its technical capacities as an optical apparatus for generating "readymade future portraits." The term readymade here refers to the mirror's abilities to replicate through reflection the face of the future spectator. What Duchamp signs in effect is not the mirror as an object, but rather the mirror's potential for producing duplicate representations "ready-made." Providing a perfect likeness but without succumbing to manual virtuosity, the mirror alludes to the mimetic aspirations of painting but with a twist, given the optical inversion of the reflected image from left to right. [36] This work is activated by the spectator who by looking completes the work by "lending" his or her face. Commonly understood as a passive act of visual reception, spectatorship is transformed into a creative act since the intervention of the viewer's gaze leads to the "production" of his or her portrait. This ready-made portrait is not reducible to an art object or a conventional "work", insofar as the image is "cancelled" as soon as one stops looking into the mirror.

However, the placement of Duchamp's signature on the mirror's bottom centre (instead of the conventional left or right margins) is confusing. Rather than referencing authorship, its location directly below suggests that it may also act as a caption (in describing the image above, like a title). By purloining the spectator's image under the insignia of his own making, Marcel Duchamp signs the future spectator's look and turns the spectator into a work. He uses the mirror but undermines its specular import and narcissistic conceits by showing that the reflected image is not merely other due to inversion, but more importantly because it reveals the inability of the mirror to fix or secure self-reflection.[37] *Three Mirrors* demonstrates that the mirrors' capacity for reflection is always open to appropriation by the spectator (whose position can be occupied by anyone), thus casting into doubt their reliability for validating images. *Three Mirrors* undermines narcissistic appropriation since the image of the spectator's face is signed as always already belonging to someone else. As signatory, Duchamp did not sign the

[35] Schwarz, *Complete Works,* p. 841.

[36] For a history of the mirror as an iconic device for representing pictorial depiction and the painter's craft, see Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early-Modern Meta-Painting*, trans. Anne-Marie Glashen, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 184-191.

[37] For a psychoanalytic analysis of mirrors and their narcissistic implications, see David Lomas, *Narcissus Reflected: The Myth of Narcissus in Surrealist and Contemporary Art*, Edinburgh, The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2011, pp. 26-54.

image itself (since the mirror image is always provisional) but the possibility of future portraits whose existence cannot be secured by the visual conceit of the spectator. By signing future readymade portraits Duchamp's autograph reminds the spectator of the provisional nature of his or her reflected image, disabling fetishization and commodification. It does so by exposing the always already alienated condition of the spectator's gaze.[38]

Why did Duchamp choose to sign three mirrors instead of just one? Was it merely a way of embedding allusions to his prior works such as *Three Standard Stoppages* or other preparatory works to *The Large Glass*, which are presented in threes or multiples thereof*?* Or was it a way of recognizing the role played by chance in *Three Mirrors,* insofar as the experience of this work is dependent on the spectator's engagement? This reference to the contingency attached to the role of the onlooker finds additional elaboration in a section of *The Large Glass* entitled *Three Oculist Witnesses.* According to Duchamp's notes, the oculist witnesses bear testimony to the erotic and lubricious goings on when the viewer's gaze is solicited be it in the visual consumption of art or in window shopping. *Three Mirrors* emerges as yet another instance of "canned chance," given the mirror's contingent and fleeting capture of the viewers' images. In his comments to Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp indicated that three functioned for him not as an ordinary number but as an indicator of contingency and multiplicity: "For me the number three is important, but simply from a numerical, not the esoteric point of view: one is unity, two is double, duality and three is the rest. When you've come to the word three, you have three million—it's the same thing as three."[39] Defined in excess of one (unity) and two (dualism), the number three designates numerical multitude, presented as a contingent relation in excess of unity and dualism. Marking his rejection of the esoteric, Duchamp's claim attests to his strategy to move beyond essentialism and dialectics through the mobilization of chance and multiplicity. We now begin to understand why this work involves three mirrors instead of just one or two. Rather than merely reinforcing the duplicative powers of the mirror, *Three Mirrors* brings into view the contingent nature of the onlooker's gaze figured as multiplicity and consequently irreducible to either identity or dualism.

[38] Benjamin Buchloh addresses these alienating implications in his discussion of John Knight's *Mirror Series* (1986), where mirrors are framed to resemble corporate logotypes so as to allude to the corporate reality that determines even the most private forms of interior reflection. See his "Knight's Moves: Situating the Art/Object," in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2003, pp. 285-304.

[39] Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 47. In his conversations with Arturo Schwarz, Duchamp reprised and qualified this formulation by adding an erotic undertone: "*two is the couple, and three is the crowd."* See Schwarz, *Complete Marcel Duchamp*, p. 128.

Art, Anti-Art and *Anart*

However, given its reliance on the spectator's look, does *Three Mirrors* represent a return to retinal art? This is not the case, since the mirror is an optical device that distorts ordinary vision through inversion and also because of the conceptual implications of this work. Undermining the immediacy of ordinary vision through optical play, the mirror "figures the labour of vision" (to use Maurice Merleau-Ponty's terms), revealing through reflection and inversion, the constructed and contrived nature of the visual image.[40] *Three Mirrors* thus stages Duchamp's invitation to the spectator to join in the creative act by transforming the spectator into author and subject matter of his or her work (as a "ready-made future portrait"). Unlike earlier ready-mades that drew on their resemblance with ordinary objects in order to question the idea of art, this work "draws on" the viewer by purloining his or her image through the intervention of their look. However, unlike the commodity, the mirror image resists the commodifying forces of the market, since it ceases to exist when no one looks at it. By casting a new light on the viewer (a previous blind spot in the history of art) and activating this position, Duchamp restores to spectatorship the capacity of making. The spectator's look is revealed not just as a testament to consumption but also as a productive gesture that holds out an open-ended promise of future portraits.[41] Challenging the premises of art, this work which is still a ready-made of sorts accomplishes its aim imperceptibly, without drama and fanfare. Unlike the ready-mades which flaunted their deliberate usurpation of art, this work bypasses and postpones the subterfuge of its intervention by proposing something that is shocking precisely because it is so innocuous, so as to be about nothing at all.

In an interview with George Hamilton in 1959, Duchamp expounded on the ready-mades' strategic role in questioning art's definition. When asked if a readymade can be thought of as a work of art, Duchamp replied that the attempt to claim the ready-made as art relies on the assumption that we already have an essential definition of art, which is not the case, since each historical period operates with its own idea of art. The impossibility of providing an essential definition of art across time led him to posit the readymade as a critique of any such attempt at definition:

[40] See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in James M. Edie (ed.), *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. William Cobb, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 168; also see Diana Silberman Keller's analysis of the mirror's capacity to mediate sight in *Mirrors Triptych Technology: Remediation and Translation Figures*, New York and Dresden, Atropos Press, 2009, pp. 52-54 and pp. 100-102.

[41] For a redefinition of the productive potential of consumption based on its understanding as the systematic manipulation of signs, see Jean Baudrillard, *Le système des objets*, Paris, Gallimard, 1968, pp. 275-276.

> So if we accept the idea that not trying to define art is a legitimate conception, then the Readymade can be seen as a sort of irony, or an attempt at showing the futility of trying to define art, because here it is, a thing that I call art. I didn't even make it by myself; as we know, art means to make, to hand made, to make by hand. It's a handmade product of man, and there instead of making, I take it readymade, even though it was made in a factory. But it is not made by hand, so it's a form of denying the possibility of defining art.[42]

Marking the fundamental recognition of the legitimacy of not defining art, the readymade emerges at once as the symptom of and solution to the futility of persisting to attempt to do so. Duchamp discovers an ingenious solution, whose logic is ironic rather than dialectical. Irreducible to either of its constitutive terms, the readymade resists the pitfalls of essentialism, dualism and dialectical synthesis. Trapped in dynamic play in a process that switches back and forth between its conditions as commodity and/or, art, the ready-made's ironic impasse resists being recouped by the forces of commodification.

This attempt through the readymade to show the futility of defining art turns out not to be a useless or empty gesture. Rather, it represents an intervention against essentialism in art: "It has a conceptual value, if you want, but it takes away all the technical jargon. You don't know whether you should take it as a work of art, and that is where the irony comes in…"[43] As an article of mechanical reproduction, the readymade is merely a term in a series, referring neither to unity nor to its dialectical opposite since its appearance is in the order of the simulacrum. Introduced in opposition to the idea of art but failing to properly sustain it since it bears an exact resemblance to what it ostensibly challenges as a multiple, the readymade derives its energies from the failure of art to legitimate itself. Posited as an alternative to art, the readymade figures the end of art as an ironic impasse: bypassing the trap of unity and dualism, the ready-made conceptually draws on the opposition of art and anti-art in order to demonstrate the impossibility of defining art.

In his interview with Joan Bakewell a couple of months before his death in 1968, Duchamp commented on the ultimate erosion and loss of shock in modern times: "No, no. Finished, finished. That's over. You cannot shock a public, at least with the same means."[44] Instead, Duchamp suggested as alternative the idea of "unart," a work which would no longer noticeable as such: "But probably the shock will come from something entirely different, as I said, non-art, anart you

[42] Jacques Caumont and Jennifer Gough-Cooper, "Marcel Duchamp: Work and Life," Jan 19, 1959.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Duchamp's interview with Joan Bakewell for "The Late Show Line Up" *BBC*, on June 5, 1968 in Naumann, *Marcel Duchamp*, p. 306.

see, A-N-A-R-T. You see with no art at all, and yet, something would be produced."[45] This imperceptible something that is produced is an intervention, a gesture that makes a difference but which is no longer recoupable as an object, as commodity or as art. Asked whether art is dead, Duchamp explained that rather than singularizing it as an entity, he attempted to open up its meaning by universalizing it: "I…by the fact that it would be universal…it would be a human factor in anyone's life to be an artist but not noticed as an artist. Do you see what I mean?"[46] Foregrounding the assumptions implicit in modern art, Duchamp's ready-mades challenged the idea of art by setting its determinations into play. In so doing, he along with his future spectators/artists delineated a new, postmodern horizon for activities that draw upon but are no longer classifiable as art.[47]

Conclusion

Late in life, Duchamp explicitly acknowledged the ready-mades as a response to commodity and market forces: "The ready-mades were a way of getting out of the exchangeability, the monetarization of the work of art, which was just beginning about then."[48] He concluded that despite their trivial outlook the ready-mades represent not just a higher degree of intellectuality, but may indeed emerge as his most important contribution: "I am not at all sure that the concept of the readymade isn't the most important single idea to come out of my work."[49] The ready-mades diagnose the impasse and futility of trying to define art, but they do so not by foreclosing, but by inviting and driving debate regarding their nature and the challenge they extend to the idea of art. Smithson's and Bürger's fears regarding the loss of the autonomy of art and the erosion of the distinction between ordinary and art objects that may constitute the space of a dialectical critique finds response in Duchamp's valorisation of the ironic implications of the ready-mades. Bypassing the "terrible flaws of dualism" that Bruno Latour identified as a trademark of modernity, Duchamp's ironic approach restitutes through the ready-mades an idea of labour whose import is conceptual rather than physical.[50] Functioning as devices rather

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] For a more detailed account of the relation of modernism and postmodernism in the arts, see Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" in *The Postmodern Conditions: A Report on Knowledge,* trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, fwd. Frederic Jameson, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 79-82.

[48] Quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant-Garde*, New York, Penguin Books, 1968, p. 40.

[49] Quoted in Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography*, p. 158.

[50] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 54.

than objects, the ready-mades mobilize the mirror play between the commodity and the work of art, in order to recover this dynamic as work in its own right. Capitalizing on consumption, the ready-mades activate its productive potential through the manipulation of signs thereby reclaiming the spectator's responsibility to add his or her contribution to the creative act.[51] As a result, Duchamp's ready-mades restitute to the spectator not just a creative function, but also the critical responsibility of interpreting and judging the stakes involved in the understanding, making, and consumption of art.

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[51] In *The Creative Act* (1957), Duchamp described the spectator's contribution as "bringing the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications" (Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 140); also see Thierry de Duve, "The Readymade and the Tube of Paint," in *Art Forum*, 24, no. 9, May 1986, p. 121.

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