

Duchamp and Creation

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Abstract:

Duchamp is often presented as an artist who would render obsolete all creative practices that had preceded him. This article does not contest the critical import of his work, but shows that he followed the same paths as any artist, as he himself explained, and that he may have encountered the same challenges.

The inventor of the readymade, the precursor of conceptual art, is often contrasted with the figure of the “inspired” artist. What if Marcel Duchamp had simply been simply a creator, like all artists? “Painting should not be exclusively (underlined by me) visual nor retinal,” he said. “It should also involve our grey matter and our hunger for understanding” (1994, p.183). Yet, hadn’t Leonard already said that, “painting is cerebral?” “It is the VIEWERS who make the pictures,” Duchamp said (1994, p.247). Is this not what Umberto Eco conceptualized as an “open work” (1965), which, regardless of period, he considered an integral part of the reception of art, with all viewers projecting their own gaze.

I. Intuition

In 1957, at 70 years old, Marcel Duchamp said the following about the “creative process”:

“The artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing. [...] We must then deny him the state of consciousness on the esthetic plane about what he is doing or why he is doing it. All his decisions in the execution of the work rest with pure intuitive and cannot be translated into a self-analysis, spoken or written, or even thought out” (1961).

Like explorers, artists do not know where they are going. Otherwise, their work would not be creation, but the reproduction of something already planned: a preconceived idea. The image of the labyrinth described by Duchamp is the same metaphor that Anton Ehrenzweig proposed (1974), as a model of the creative path: At each fork in the road, artists choose a possible way forward and rule out others. In the end, they find their way towards a “clearing.” The reason for this apparent contradiction can be found in an “unconscious scanning,” “as if” we had an aerial view or a map of possible itineraries, allowing to choose the fertile paths, rather than the dead-ends. Artists are not “fully aware.” Yet, even so, this unconscious part is not pure chance. Do we not say that a lapsus or a Freudian slip, “is no coincidence...»

The creative process occurs by *trial and error*, as it’s called in English: an alternation between tries and mistakes, which allow us, by process of elimination, to “succeed,” to *find the way out*, in the etymological sense of the Italian *ri-uscire*, meaning to “make it through.” Thus, success is entirely relative. At the time of action, it may even seem like a failure. Just as balancing can be very delicate, the solution most often hangs by a thread. It is also a thread, Ariadne’s thread, the one that allowed Theseus to find his way out of the labyrinth. This retrospective and rational thread through the maze, that historians, aestheticians and critics follow, allows us to trace past forks in the road, without error. In a “retrospective” exhibition, without any possible hesitation, the path followed leads us back to the beginning. However, because the works are generally hung chronologically, all indeterminacy is downplayed, suggesting that the route was linear, if not rectilinear. This is what Bergson referred to when he spoke of retrospective illusion.¹

We must oppose this to the artist’s point of view, in the “poietic” gushing forth of creation, and the artist’s pre-rational behavior, that can only be explained retrospectively. Thus, in terms of hermeneutics, the ready-made seemed to emerge as a logical necessity, and therefore a deliberate artistic statement. Yet heuristically, it was the result of the sensorial relations between artist and object.

If we are to believe Marcel Duchamp’s own words, his first ready-made in 1913 was not the fruit of reasoning, but perhaps, originally, simply the product of his gaze captivated by the circular movement of bicycle wheel spokes in light (Duchamp, 1994, p. 191), a bit like when one is amazed at the sight of a fire burning in a fireplace. Similarly, the same year, he said he was “so fascinat [ed],” by the sight of a cocoa grinder in action in the window of Gamelin Chocolatier in Rouen (1994, p.179). His obsession with rotary movement makes this hypothesis quite plausible. Bicycles were a recent invention, at the time. They had not been sold in their present form, complete with tires, before 1900, and the first *Tour de France* race took place only in 1903.

The astonishment triggered by such an invention has obviously worn away a hundred years later. Such a phenomenon could be compared to our passion today for digital photography, the internet or cell phones. Intuition comes first, but that does not mean that there is no rationality at work, as Mark Rothko noted (Breslin, 1993, p. 330): “*Intuition is the height of rationality. Not opposed. Intuition is the opposite of formulation. Of dead knowledge.*”

We know that if you ask artists (or students) to explain their artistic approaches before these arise, this will very likely to lead them to falsify the works, in order to conform the works to an agreed-upon idea, or worse, cut them off from their creative inspiration. A sort of naivety is critical to opening up to possibilities; naivety that a rational description would prematurely close off, a bit like a fishing trap from which a fish could no longer escape.

2. Sensory experience

The thought process of artists takes place through acts, in a constant confrontation between the strangeness of life and oneself: through exploration of materials and situations, which often, through the resistance that they put up, shake up the artist’s original intentions, forcing to go beyond initial frustrations, to embrace something unexpected.

The *Standard Stoppages*, also from 1913, is a “remarkable” example – in the way that, in geometry, a triangle is referred to as “remarkable” (rectangle, isosceles and equilateral), as opposed to “nondescript” triangles: “*It [...] should be viewed horizontally and not vertically, because each strip shows a curved line made from a meter-long piece of thread, after it had been dropped from a height of 1 meter, without controlling the distortion of the thread during the fall*” (Molderings, 2010, p. 64). Firstly, if you redo the experiment, you will find that the inertia of the coiling of the thread around the spool produces loops, and, if the thread does not undergo preliminary a smoothing operation, the fall of the thread will not give the flexible continuous lines that are found in *The Stoppages*. This observation can be made only after having conducted some unconvincing experiments. Some observers have questioned the random nature of these thread falls, estimating that they must have been provoked artificially (Molderings, 2007).

However, what characterizes these three lines, above all, is the same serpentine curve in each one: convex at one end, then concave. This is exactly what William Hogarth called the “Line of Beauty” which was the visual paradigm of his entire aesthetic theory. He even used this line as a kind of signature, as we can see in his well-known 1745 *Self-Portrait 2 with his dog*. In this painting, in the bottom left, this *line of beauty and grace*, is curiously embodied in an object that casts its shadow on the palette, and curves around the thumb hole. The analogy of this configuration is striking, with the double curve of the Taoist yin and yang midline. As it is represented in the painting, this wavy line is also Hogarth’s line of “grace,” a more subtle and elusive aesthetic category than the more dogmatic notion of “beauty.” Yet, perhaps what distinguishes it is precisely the tension between one thing and its opposite. The *Three Standard Stoppages* therefore presents very distinct contours, particularly attracting the viewer’s gaze, with the initial fluidity of the thread being fixed by the of the rigid cut of the wooden yardstick. As with any work, this work calls for a sensorial (and therefore “retinal”) perception.

Similarly, when turned at a 90° angle, thus appearing quite unusual, the curve of the urinal could educe the erotic image of a diffuse evocation of the female body: the pelvis, the uterus, the genitals... A venereal inspiration, which was still very active in bathrooms at the time, certainly must have stimulated Duchamp's mischievous sense of humor. As for the white tiled restrooms, that are so familiar to us today, these were still a novelty in 1913. We can recall Degas and Bonnard's zinc tubs! Jacob Delafon, the ceramic toilette company, was founded only in 1901.

We can consider readymade in the same way we can consider assemblage sculptures. Thus Picasso's *Bull's Head* consists of a bicycle seat and handlebars which resemble the pointed shape of of an animal skull and its double-curved horns. Yet beyond this "retinal" resemblance, this assemblage works semantically: the two elements taken from the bicycle are not irrelevant: The seat and steering mechanism are the organs of command. They very pertinently and effectively explore the theme of the "head" of this mythical animal, this near-divinity. Yet, as Picasso told Brassai (1969), "*The idea of this bull's head came without me ever thinking of it.*" The readymade is a particular case of assemblage of a single element. It, too, makes sense, metaphorically, that is, by transfer.

The ready-made emerged out of a sensorial epiphany: by being viewed, the object eventually appeared as a strange and vaguely disturbing thing - *unheimlich* (firstly in its etymological meaning: "that which is not from home") which led Duchamp to this "*visual indifference*" (Duchamp, 1994, p. 191).

3. Creative behavior

We could very well explain the rise of readymade objects to the level of an original creation, by adopting the criteria which, according to René Passeron (1993), characterizes creative behavior: It must first consist of the production a singular object or of an unrestricted prototype, which is not immediately oriented towards an end. The object produced must then have the status of a pseudo-person, meaning that through its production, it must go through a "semiotic mutation," taking it beyond its technical utility, so that it become more a "psychological nourishment." Lastly, it is a production for which the creator must "*go out on a limb,*" meaning that the creator must be emotionally involved in the creative action.

The term "production" could exclude readymades, if understood exclusively as material fabrication. Yet, if we extend the meaning, as Rene Passeron did, to include the way that one "*produces a work or a document,*" meaning one only shows it; and if we also consider the decontextualization and transformation that the object is subject to (the wheel mounted on the stool, the urinal placed at a 90 ° angle), we can consider Duchamp's act just as much one of production, as is Picasso's act in making *Bull's Head*.

Through the artist's gaze, an object becomes individualized and unique. This point becomes even more clear when the object is a mass produced one. The artist's (and then the "viewer's") gaze is highly active. Subsequently, the strangeness with which we eventually perceive this object, confers a subjective reality of individual existence upon the uniqueness of the object; which turns it into "pseudo-person," that is, into "psychological nourishment." Furthermore, contrary to popular belief, *Fountain* is a particularly auratic work.

Finally, undeniably, he who was cheeky enough to exhibit it, went out on a limb, especially when one considers the worsening circumstances of World War I which made this prank particularly scandalous. Is it perhaps in this, that Duchamp was a heroic artist? So, creation is a kind of drifting of the mind, giving results which are unknown in advance.

"In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization, through a chain of totally subjective reactions. The struggle toward the realization is a series of efforts, pains, satisfactions, refusals, decisions which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least on the aesthetic plane. [...] This difference between what he intended to realize and did realize is the personal "art coefficient" contained in the work." (Duchamp, 1961).

This process could be that of all creators, according to Ehrenzweig, who devoted a few pages to Duchamp (1974, pp. 137-39). Thus the work in progress is, even for the artist making it, an "open work." Hence, conception is not disassociated from realization. If there is "conception" it is more genital than conceptual. When Duchamp spoke of "realization" he meant something that happens in "reality" more than a plan is carried out. Even if his meticulous work began with almost obsessional "completely dry drawing," he did not really know where it would lead. Twenty years after its creation, when looking at *The Large Glass*, the first thing he said was that he loved it ever more because of the impact of its 1926 transportation accident. He said,

"I like these cracks because they do not look like broken glass. They have a symmetrical architecture and form. Moreover, I see them as a curious intention that I am not responsible for: very much an intention, somehow, that I respect and appreciate" (1994, p. 176).

What he liked most was not that which he had extensively and meticulously premeditated, but the way this had been taken up and transformed by something that had escaped him. We can recall that, if, Duchamp in 1923, before even having "completed" *The Large Glass*, "had 'ceased' to be an artist, in order to devote himself to chess," as Rosalind Krauss said (1997, p. 89), it was because, just like when he had stopped being a cubist painter: "[...] it was time to change. Always this need for change, this desire to never repeat myself..." (Duchamp, 1994, p. 178). One could say that Duchamp stopped being an artist, in order to remain an artist: to no longer depend on "taste" and public expectations. This might indeed seem rather paradoxical, for someone who affirmed that, "It is the viewers who make the pictures" (1994, p. 247). Yet, what mattered most to him was his perfectly free act as a creator. Sweeney, with whom he discussed this, even spoke of Duchamp's "disregard for the broad public" (Nelson, Sweeney, 1958, p. 94.).

Another reading is that - perhaps (?) - of Joseph Beuys who, did a performance in 1964 in Düsseldorf entitled "*The Silence of Marcel Duchamp is Overrated*" (Mann, 1999). Did an excess of calculation, speculation and control in Duchamp's work distance the artist from an immediate relationship to the sensorial, and take him farther away from the innocence required for the creative act? Concerning *The Large Glass*, Duchamp said to Sweeney, "All the glass was imagined and was drawn in 1913 and 1914, on paper. It was based on a perspective view, meaning complete control of the placement of things. It couldn't be haphazard or changed afterwards. It had to go through according to plan" (Nelson, Sweeney, 1958, p. 94).

One can imagine that having worked on this so precisely defined project for ten years, Duchamp became a prisoner of his own calculations. We could contrast him with Picasso (1998, p. 135), who said: *"I think a work of art is the fruit of calculations, but often of calculations unknown to the artists themselves, just like carrier pigeons, which calculate to return to their nest. However, this very precise calculation, is unknown to the calculator. It is a calculation that precedes intelligence."*

4. Game rules

This raises the question of rules. Rules are often necessary to trigger creation, but can also end up choking creativity. Rosalind Krauss said that Duchamp was heavily influenced by Raymond Roussel, following a 1911 performance, of his *Impressions of Africa*, which depicts art-making machines that did painting, music, tapestry and so on.

In his book, *How I wrote certain of my books*, published only in 1935, after his probable suicide, Roussel explains his "process" that he thought would be helpful for "writers of the future." Without going into detail, we can say it involves writing down two almost identical sentences, whose words have dual meanings, one used in the beginning, the other at the end.

"Once the two sentences were decided upon, the next step was to write a story that could begin with the first and finish with the second. It was from finding a solution to this, that I drew all my material" (Roussel, 1977, p. 12). In this, Krauss sees the principle of Duchampian creation of the ready-made:

"[...] Duchamp's work resembled [...] the operation of machines in Impressions of Africa. He reduced his approach to a pure act of selection. Duchamp had transformed himself into a sort of mechanical switch, capable of activating the impersonal processes of production an artwork. [...] From that point on, making art was quite legitimately transformed into a speculative activity: that of asking questions" (Krauss, 1997, p. 79).

This "retrospective" vision completely misses that which weaves together the substance of an artistic approach, reduces the approach to a linear path, and flattens the converging lines of its complexity. It is an almost hagiographic vision of art history. Whereas Duchamp's work is probably both a success and a failure. Process is not everything. Roussel (1977, p. 23) was clear about this: *"In short, this process is a cousin of the rhyme. In both cases there is unexpected creation, due to phonetic combinations. This is primarily a poetic process. Yet, one must to know how to use this process. Just as one can create good or bad verses with rhymes; with this process, one can write good or bad books."* If the artist's approach comes from a game, there must be game rules. This not new. Roussel recalled: Poets have always followed rules of measure, rhyme, meter and rhythm, all the while seeking assonance and alliteration. As Duchamp himself said, he had quite a *"craving for alliteration."* (1961) Of course we can break the rules, as Baudelaire did when he wrote *Little Poems in Prose*. Yet this approach may be more difficult. Aragon (1981, pp. 61-71) thought poorly of *"the awful broken-toothed comb of free verse,"* and argued that rhyme was the *"initiator of new things in the old high language, which is an end in itself, and which is called poetry."*

Marcel Duchamp is a paradoxical artist. In some ways, his «creative process» was very much the same as that described by many artists and creators: a kind of alternation between indifference and discernment, a cerebral switch between exploration and selection, between invention and intention... When, in 1923, he stopped “being” an artist, it was perhaps for good reasons, but also for not such good reasons: He did so, to avoid being a “professional,” so as to remain among “the others, the mavericks, free from obligations and thus from bonds.” (Duchamp, 1994, p. 180). Yet perhaps also his manner of over-calculating and over-planning, as was particularly at work in *The Large Glass*, took him away from the indeterminacy, without which creation cannot establish itself and unfold. Marcel Duchamp is an example, but certainly not a model.

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