Marcel Duchamp: The Most Influential Artist of the 20th Century?

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"The danger for me is to please an immediate public – the immediate public that comes around you, and takes you in, and accepts you, and gives you success, and everything. Instead of that, I would rather wait for the public that will come fifty years later – or a hundred years – after my death. But it is this public, and this public alone, which interests me."[1]
Marcel Duchamp, 1955

1. A Rapid Career at a Ripe Old Age

One of the most influential artists of the 20th century – this attribute is often ascribed to Marcel Duchamp today.[2] It is therefore all the more difficult to imagine that, until well into the fifties, Duchamp was completely unknown to most art-minded members of the public. Alain Jouffroy, for example, writes that in 1954 he had enormous difficulty in getting a brief interview with Duchamp published because the name of Marcel Duchamp meant nothing to the editor-in-chief of the then leading French art magazine, *Arts-Spectacles*.[3] Indeed, it is hardly credible that this was the first ever interview to be published in a European art magazine. In the USA, on the other hand, the name of Marcel Duchamp had never quite been forgotten since the scandalous success of his *Nu descendant un escalier* (Nude Descending a Staircase) at the Armory Show in New York in 1913, though this fame was confined to just this one picture. Robert Motherwell, for example, said in an interview in 1974: "I would say that one of the most astonishing things in my lifetime as an artist is his prominence. Thirty years ago, if somebody had said to me, 'He may become the major influence on the art scene,' I'd have said, 'You're out of your mind,' and most of my judgments were quite accurate then."[4] We must lend all the more weight to this statement as it was Motherwell himself who, in 1951, published an anthology – *The Dada Painters and Poets* – which made an important contribution to the rediscovery of Duchamp and Dadaism.
How can we explain the paradox that the allegedly most influential artist of the 20th century remained virtually unknown until almost the middle of that century? Partially, of course, through the myth of his having abandoned art for chess, a myth which he himself helped to

cultivate. Since Duchamp was not all that productive – in terms of quantity – his meagre oeuvre is almost non-existent in the art market and in exhibitions. His works are to be found almost exclusively in private collections or, as in the case of numerous Readymades, have simply disappeared. Even for keen art lovers during the first half of the 20th century a work of Duchamp's was a genuine rarity. It was not until the Arensberg Collection was opened to the public at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1954 that Duchamp's work acquired any lasting museum status. And in Europe it was not until 1959, when the first monograph of Duchamp was published by Robert Lebel, that any deeper knowledge and understanding of Duchamp's oeuvre was possible.

All the more fascinating, therefore, was Duchamp's meteoric rise to fame during the sixties. Writing in the catalogue of the Duchamp retrospective at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1966, Richard Hamilton made the following, by then irrefutable assertion: "No living artist commands a higher regard among the younger generation than Marcel Duchamp."[5] Even before Duchamp's death, Calvin Tomkins published his book *The World of Marcel Duchamp* in the Time-Life Library of Arts, a popular series normally reserved for classics, acclaiming Duchamp – likewise in 1966 – as the "idol of the iconoclasts" of Pop Art. In 1968, at the age of 81, Duchamp died at the height of his fame. The *New York Times* even dedicated two different obituaries to him, the one describing him as the "... of some 4,000 years of art ... the most destructive artist in history", the other emphasizing the constructive aspect of Duchamp's continued influence and declaring him as what he is still considered to be today: "one of the most influential artists of the century".[6]

2. From Inside Tip to Father Figure: The Rediscovery of Marcel Duchamp by the Artists of the Early Sixties

The continued influence of Duchamp's oeuvre has by no means waned in the meantime. On the contrary, it has become stronger and more widespread, both in art itself and in the academic fields of art theory and art history. Duchamp's career is one of the few examples of how, in the 20th century, it was possible to achieve lasting fame without the support of the art market and the art critics. The decisive factor behind this fame was the development of art since the era of Pop Art and Nouveau Réalisme, movements which had made Duchamp's oeuvre their historical model. Much has been written about how these developments in art since the mid-fifties compare with Duchamp's oeuvre of forty years before. It is seldom the case, however, that any account is taken of the fact that Duchamp was hardly known before

1960 and very little information about him was available when this young generation of artists began to take an interest in him. Indeed, it was these artists who played an active part in the rediscovery of Duchamp, well before art historians and museums began to take any notice of him. The following examples serve to show how Duchamp's role as a model for the artists of the late fifties and early sixties, a role which we today regard as a matter of course, may be seen as an interaction which was of benefit to both sides.

In the USA, an important mediating function was performed by John Cage. Through his acquaintance and subsequent friendship with Duchamp from the end of the forties, he was an important link between the Surrealists and Dadaists who had emigrated to the USA during the Second World War and the generation of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. As a musician, Cage was able to embrace and communicate the conceptual essence of Duchamp's art without the encumbrance of iconographical traditions. The fact that his introduction of chance operations into his musical compositions is often seen as a criticism of the traditional European cult of the genius did not prevent Cage from referring, several times, to Duchamp as the precursor of the "open work of art". Some of the artists who started the Happening and Fluxus movement – such as Allan Kaprow, George Brecht, and Dick Higgins – were Cage students and translated these musical concepts back into intermedia forms of visual art.

In Europe, although Duchamp was recognized as the precursor of Surrealism, this context was rather off-putting for many of the artists of the post-war generation. Instead, they discovered other aspects of his work which they were able to exploit to their advantage. Jean Tinguely and Pontus Hulten, for example, vigorously advocated – against strong opposition from the gallery owner Denise René – the showing of Duchamp's optical experiments at the Paris exhibition *Le Mouvement* in 1955, an exhibition which was the prelude to the success story of Kinetic Art.[7] Soon afterwards, Hulten and Tinguely set out in search of a copy of Duchamp's film *Anémic Cinéma*. And then, in 1959, before he embarked upon his own artistic career, Daniel Spoerri founded the first multiple edition and included in this edition Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs* as a historical model. George Brecht analysed Duchamp's experiments with chance operations in his essay "Chance Imagery" in 1957, an essay which was later to become the important theoretical foundation of Fluxus. Richard Hamilton, in 1960, produced an outstanding English translation of the texts in Duchamp's *Green Box,* the significance of which was acknowledged, in turn, in a review written by Jasper Johns.

The interest and recognition of this young generation of artists also found expression in their gestures, homages, and references. According to its promoter and leading spokesman, Pierre Restany, Nouveau Réalisme elevated "the Dadaist Readymade to the magnitude of modern

miracles".[8] For his *Hommage à Duchamp* of 1960, Jean Tinguely produced a bicycle wheel hopping about impatiently on a pedestal. In 1961, Jasper Johns pressed Duchamp's *Feuille de Vigne Femelle* (Female Fig Leaf) into the wax surface of his painting *No,* and also incorporated numerous Duchamp references and quotations in other works.[9] Robert Rauschenberg, in 1960, had a bottle rack, which he had purchased second-hand, signed by Duchamp. The film star Dennis Hopper, himself a visual artist, followed suit in the same year with his own choice of bottle rack, in this case a new one. Andy Warhol made one of his early *Screentest* films with Duchamp.

The above examples prove that Duchamp's significance had already been recognized by young artists and was already being actively studied and promoted by them well before art museums and art historians had begun to appreciate Duchamp on any large scale. Every newly discovered facet of his diversified oeuvre was treated like an inside tip. Some artists became Duchamp researchers and biographers themselves, like Pontus Hulten and Serge Stauffer. Both of them were still working as artists when they discovered Duchamp during the fifties and began their correspondence with him.[10] It was Hulten who awakened Tinguely's interest in Duchamp, and it was from Stauffer that Daniel Spoerri and André Thomkins first learnt about Duchamp. Hulten's 1961 touring exhibition *Bewogen Beweging* was the first presentation of Duchamp in the context of contemporary Kinetic Art. In 1960, Serge Stauffer organized the first Duchamp exhibition to be shown in a European museum, namely *Dokumentation über Marcel Duchamp* at the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Zurich.

As these examples show when viewed in their entirety, Duchamp served as a point of reference for astonishingly different, even completely opposing kinds of art, ranging from Jasper Johns's static icons to Jean Tinguely's kinetic machines and George Brecht's conceptual events. Thus, if Duchamp was indeed the most influential artist of the century, it was certainly not on account of any specific style or school along the lines of some one-dimensional, art-historical cause-and-effect model. For, as Duchamp himself said, "I forced myself to contradict myself in order to avoid conforming to my own taste."[11] This methodological contradictoriness of Duchamp's art had a mushrooming effect on the writings of art theorists and historians. In the literature that has been growing exponentially since the mid-sixties, Duchamp's art has been interpreted from virtually all conceivable angles, from alchemy through non-Euclidean geometry to linguistic philosophy and psychoanalysis.[12] "It is astonishing," John Cage once remarked, "how very much Marcel Duchamp makes others creative."[13]

The methodological contradictoriness of Duchamp's oeuvre was also unfolding in his role as a model for many of the new movements in contemporary art during the sixties. It would seem that Duchamp had already done, in one form or another, everything which made its appearance on the art scene during this decade of awakening. As Allan Kaprow put it, Duchamp changed from somebody one simply had to discover to somebody one simply couldn't get rid of. It was in the field of Conceptual Art more than in any other that artists would desperately try to avoid the "Duchamp effect", as we shall see in the fourth chapter on the Readymade. Nam June Paik put it even more clearly: "Marcel Duchamp has already done everything there is to do – except video ... only through video art can we get ahead of Marcel Duchamp."[14] And in order to block this last remaining way into the future, the video-maker John Sanborn launched, in 1977, the posthumously discovered *Last Videotapes of Marcel Duchamp,* but these were revealed as fakes soon after their premiere at New York's "Kitchen", which had drawn a full house of 450 guests.

Does progress in art after Duchamp indeed depend on the progress of media technology? Or should we not rather call in question the concept of progress as it is applied to the history of art? For what we call progress is in fact the counterpart to the influence which is ascribed to all the great figures of the history of art. These two models, progress and influence, menace as Scylla and Charybdis our attempts to navigate our way through the development logic of 20th-century art. But perhaps Duchamp's case clearly shows that we are dealing here with antiquated instruments from the toolbox of classical art-historical methodology, which are the wrong tools for dismantling the motor of modernism.

3. From the Readymade to the Remake: The Origin, Disappearance, and Revival of the Readymades

The most drastic examples of Duchamp's very slow rise from oblivion to prominence are furnished by the Readymades. His famous *Roue de bicyclette* (Bicycle Wheel) of 1913, for example, was not exhibited until almost forty years after its making, in the form of a specially constructed replica of the original, for the latter had long since disappeared.[15] It is the Readymades, moreover, and not the *Large Glass,* which most clearly represent Duchamp's influence on the younger generations of artists. Consequently, before we can deal with the question as to what we actually understand by this influence, which has been stressed again and again, we must take a brief look at the history of the origin and disappearance of the Readymades.

When the Readymades were at the height of their popularity, in 1965, Duchamp did not shrink from saying, "Actually they were a very personal experiment that I had never expected to show to the public."[16] As I have dealt elsewhere[17] in far greater detail with the question as to how seriously this statement must be taken, the following few examples ought, I think, to suffice here. While a journalist was interviewing Duchamp in his studio, in 1916, her eye fell on a large, shiny, obviously unused snow shovel hanging from the ceiling. Duchamp made no mention whatsoever of the fact that this was his work, nor was the term "Readymade" ever mentioned. Whilst at the only contemporary public exhibition of Duchamp's Readymades, in 1916, the term Readymade appeared in the exhibition catalogue of the Bourgois Gallery, New York, the objects themselves remained unnoticed by both the public and the press, such that to this day Duchamp researchers are still wondering which "Two Ready-mades" they might have been. The only Readymade ever to attract public attention was the *Fountain,* a urinal signed "R. Mutt" and submitted to the first exhibition of the New York Society of Independent Artists, which refused it. But that Duchamp was actually the spirit behind the "Richard Mutt Case" remained a mystery to almost all contemporaries, and even today there is still some slight doubt among Duchamp experts as to its sole authorship.[18]

For its part, Duchamp's transatlantic way of life and way of working likewise contributed to the contemporary ignorance of the Readymade. Although he was still living in Paris when he selected his first "objets tout faits", such as the bottle rack and the bicycle wheel, it was not until after he moved to New York, in 1915, that he used the American term "ready-made" to describe them, a term hitherto reserved for such prefabricated products as off-the-peg garments as opposed to bespoke tailoring. The production of such prefabricated products, which was far more advanced in the USA than in Europe, doubtless formed the backcloth for Duchamp's development of his Readymade concept into a whole series of objects, the original quantity of which has, however, remained unknown to the present day.[19]

In Parisian avant-garde circles, Duchamp's exhibition of such objects might perhaps have met with a positive response. I maintain this on the strength of the often ignored fact that, at the same time as Duchamp, the poet Blaise Cendrars selected a "ready-made" piece, namely his poem "Dernière heure" (Last Minute) of 1914, which he copied almost verbatim from the last minute column of the newspaper *Paris Midi*.[20] Although Cendrars and Duchamp both belonged to the circle around Apollinaire, there does not seem to have been any connection between them otherwise, which allows of the assumption that, as is so often the case, these two "inventions" were, whilst being parallel, wholly independent of each other. Cendrars neither used the term "Readymade" as coined by Duchamp in America nor did he develop his

poem into a whole series of works of the same genre. What he did do, on the other hand, was to establish the radicalized principle of appropriating fragmentary quotations from the media, a principle which literature has retained right up to the present day. Thus, in poetry as in sculpture, the selection of something already finished, already mass-produced, takes the place of artistic creation.

However, in 1913, America had just been exposed to the shock of modernism through the New York Armory Show. The scandal surrounding Duchamp's *Nu descendant un escalier* (Nude Descending a Staircase), a painting which was still recognizably figural, clearly shows the limit to which the contemporary public was able to go in its appreciation and/or understanding of contemporary art. What, therefore, could be expected from the public in reaction to industrially mass-produced products, if not absolute perplexity, as in the "Richard Mutt Case"? Although the Readymade was intended not least as a reflection of the American way of life, it had to wait, paradoxically, several decades and take a detour via Europe before it could be better understood by the American art scene. Whilst there were indeed sporadic eyewitness reports of Duchamp's working with prefabricated objects in the USA during the twenties, these reports neither use the term "Readymade" nor contribute to an understanding of Duchamp's concept.[21] The first more detailed art-critical appraisals of the Readymade as the work of Duchamp are to be found in the context of Surrealism during the thirties, when Duchamp's career as an "artist for artists" began, the career which finally made him so prominent during the sixties. The opportunity for these appraisals was provided by Duchamp himself when, in 1934, he published some of his notes on the Readymade from his *Green Box*, though without furnishing any detailed information on the number and kind of Readymades he had hitherto realized. Again acting as his own historian, Duchamp assembled his *Boîte-en-valise* (Box in a Valise), between the years of 1936 and 1941, with photographs and models of the entire group of Readymades known today. In other words: almost everything we know about the Readymades came from Duchamp himself.

But even with the help of this comprehensive documentation, which to some extent raised the facsimiles to the status of an art form in their own right, the Readymades had still not become what they are today generally understood to be: industrially manufactured and commercially available objects which are exhibited as works of art.[22] A further step was necessary in order to be able to exhibit the Readymades on a much larger scale. After replicas had been used for Duchamp exhibitions on several occasions at the beginning of the sixties, some of them even being signed by Duchamp when the occasion presented itself, Duchamp decided, in 1964, to agree to the production of fourteen Readymades as multiples in a limited edition of eight by

Galleria Schwarz in Milan. And if this undertaking – namely the turning of industrial Readymades into artificial multiples – was not paradoxical enough, the circumstances surrounding this limited edition bordered on absurdity: the urinal (*Fountain*), for example, was copied from surviving photographs and cast in porcelain at enormous expense in a sanitaryware factory. Thus it was that with the production of these 112 multiples, which today are to be found in museums all over the world, the Readymade became – fifty years after its original conception – exactly what an art-historical dictionary, for example, defines it as: "In 1915, the French artist Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) mounted a bottle rack on a pedestal and exhibited it as a "Readymade" in an art exhibition."[23]

With this final stage of their reconstruction completed, the Readymades stood, as remakes of their own, almost forgotten past, on the threshold of a new life. It was a life which placed the formerly "personal experiment" in the limelight of the art world. The Readymades now found themselves in the company of such objects as Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and Arman's *Accumulations,* works behind which Duchamp's Readymade concept was acknowledged as having been the direct influence. Donald Judd, too, made reference to Duchamp's bottle rack in defining his Minimalist objects as "three-dimensional works" beyond painting and sculpture.[24] And Conceptual Art's thematization of the art context likewise harks back to Duchamp.

4. Readymade Reception as a Redefinition

However, if we view the entire history of the reception of the Readymades since the sixties, not only in art itself but also in scholarship, against the background of the above-described history of the Readymades and their contemporary obscurity, must we not see it as a huge misunderstanding – and, what is more, a misunderstanding to which Duchamp himself actively contributed? The only way out, it would seem, is to differentiate strictly between the *history of the Readymades as objects* and the *history of the Readymades as ideas*. If we take a closer look at them, each individual historical exemplar reveals itself as a completely different case, not just in respect of its historical development but in terms of its physical state, too, for each object manifests relatively large or small changes which offer sufficient scope for speculation on the meticulous decisions which Duchamp, according to his own statement, took when selecting it.[25] But in their entirety and "family resemblance", to use a term coined by Ludwig Wittgenstein, they refer to the principle which is common to all. In much the same way as the individual usages of a word, according to Wittgenstein, together make up its

meaning, the meaning of the term "Readymade", never defined by Duchamp, results from the entirety of the objects which he selected and designated as Readymades. Accordingly, the smallest common denominator would be: selected, prefabricated objects which are not works made by the artist himself – a definition entirely in keeping with the English or American understanding of "ready-made".[26] However, since both the material existence of the objects and the context of their reception undergo constant change, as we have seen, so, too, does the meaning of the term "Readymade" remain in a state of flux.

Whenever other artists embrace the principle of the Readymade, the idea becomes completely detached from the historical objects and begins a life of its own. In so doing, it illustrates in the best way possible Duchamp's dictum that it is the viewer who makes the pictures. The continued artistic influence of the Readymade principle may therefore be understood only as a permanent redefinition of its meaning. This redefinition began as early as the adoption of the Readymade principle by Duchamp's contemporary Man Ray, whose objects, unlike Duchamp's Readymades, all had a pictorial quality which was reinforced by an appropriately suggestive title. It continued in the *objets trouvés* of Surrealism, the selection of which depended purely on chance and the subconscious, thus questioning the role of authorship in a new way.

By the sixties, the emphasis was on the character of these works as objects, whereby Pop Art stressed their commonplace, commercial character and Nouveau Réalisme emphasized their quality as relics of normal everyday life. Arman's *Accumulations*, which were held in high esteem by Duchamp, played on the relationship and difference between objects of the same name, a process which permitted a subtle examination of their "family resemblance". These accumulated objects often manifested traces of use, testified to collector's mania, and did not come straight off the shelf like the objects of Pop Art. It is in the context of Pop Art that the remake aspect, which represented the last chapter of the history of Duchamp's Readymades, was taken yet a step further. Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and Jasper Johns's *Light Bulb* were handmade replicas of mass-produced commercial products. What could be a better justification of Duchamp's transformation of his Readymades into multiples than these artificial "dummies" which Warhol stacked in their hundreds, like palleted goods in the storeroom of a supermarket, at New York's Stable Gallery in that same year of 1964?

The redefinition of the Readymade principle took a new turn in Conceptual Art. In 1969, as if it had waited for the death of its master, the Readymade found itself in the crossfire of a debate on art "Beyond Objects", this being the title of an essay by Robert Morris. Whereas Robert Morris maintained that the Readymades were "traditionally iconic art objects", Joseph

Kosuth saw them as the starting point for all Conceptual Art and as the counterpart to the modernism hitherto rooted in Cubism.[27] "The event that made conceivable the realization that it was possible to 'speak another language' and still make sense in art was Marcel Duchamp's first unassisted Readymade. With the unassisted Readymade, art changed its focus from the form of the language to what was being said.... This change – one from 'appearance' to 'conception' – was the beginning of 'modern' art and the beginning of conceptual art. All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually."[28]

Daniel Buren, on the other hand, maintained – likewise in 1969 – that the "visibility" of the Readymade alone depended on the art context as an extended "frame" of painting and therefore in no way reached beyond the object character of art.[29] It was along similar lines that the British group of artists Art & Language developed, in 1969, a three-stage model extending from the classical work of painting and sculpture through the collage to the Readymade. The fourth stage – "Declaration" – involved situations which are seen as or thought of as art, but are not incorporated in the art context on a permanent basis.[30] Further examples may also be cited from 1969: Michael Asher's exhibition of a museum room which was completely empty except for mobile partitions and Marcel Broodthaers's founding of the *Musée d'Art Moderne (Section XIX^e siècle) Département des Aigles* (Museum of Modern Art [19th-Century Section] Department of Eagles) which opened in his studio, this having been crammed full of empty crates of the kind used for transporting works of art, with a speech by a "genuine" museum director. It was these two approaches which Benjamin Buchloh saw as a means of resolving the "Duchamp dilemma" that every object in the art context automatically becomes art.[31]

This brief excursion into the discussions which took place in 1969 shows that, in Conceptual Art, the Readymade principle served as the basis for a great many completely opposed arguments. Like the diversity of contradictory interpretations among art theorists and historians, this permanent redefinition of the Readymade by the artists themselves was to a large extent instrumental in turning this erstwhile "personal experiment" into a key element of modern art without ever arriving at an ultimate answer to the question as to what a Readymade actually is.

It would of course be quite possible to trace this permanent process of redefining the Readymade all the way through to the present day, although this exercise would pose certain problems inasmuch as the contemporary processes of re-interpretation, which have become increasingly widespread, and during the nineties in particular, may be comprehended only through the intermediate stage of the art of the sixties. The developments in art during the sixties, these being, from their own standpoint, still modern, insert themselves like a kind of

filter between Appropriation Art, a movement sailing under the flag of post-modernism, and its "protomodern" roots in Duchamp's Readymade. Thus it is that Jeff Koons's stainless steel castings of commonplace objects seem like even more perfect stylizations of Warhol's fetishized consumerism. Sherrie Levine's and Elaine Sturtevant's hand-painted replicas of works of classic modernism revive such questions as "What is painting?" or "What is authenticity?", the kind of questions originally posed by Jasper Johns's flag paintings. Guillaume Bijl's transformations of exhibition rooms into lamp shops or billiard saloons hark back to Marcel Broodthaers's transformation of entire contexts instead of individual objects. Most recently, Plamen Dejanov and Svetlana Heger have replaced their identity as artists with the representation of a car brand (they work in close co-operation with BMW) and thus created an intelligent re-mix of Conceptual Art's "going beyond the object" and Warhol's fetishizing of consumer goods.

It is certainly no accident that art theorists and historians have likewise been constantly re-interpreting the Readymade over the last thirty years. The following two examples serve to illustrate the extremes to which the discussion has already been carried. According to Thierry de Duve's discussion of Clement Greenberg's puristic notion of modernism, the Readymade belongs to the history of painting and not to that of sculpture.[32] The artist Rhonda Shearer maintains that Duchamp did not select his objects but fabricated them himself, and she attempts to decipher the Readymades as reified mathematical theories by means of computer simulations bordering on the absurd.[33]

5. The "Eternal Up-to-Dateness" of the Readymade Principle in Modernism and Post-Modernism

This long, uninterrupted process of re-interpretation eventually leads us to the paradox of the "eternal up-to-dateness" of the Readymade principle, leaving behind the objects selected by Duchamp almost a century ago. It is thus becoming increasingly absurd to say that all these phenomena are ascribable to Marcel Duchamp's influence on the art of the 20th and 21st centuries. The limits of a monocausal model of the evolution of the history of art must by now have become clear. Such a model has its classical roots in the philosophy of Giorgio Vasari, whose *Lives of the Artists* promulgated the fatal concept of progress based on the notion that the ever-increasing perfection of art would culminate in the absolute ideal of eternal beauty. Nothing else but a severe critique of this idea of absolute progress is at the core of the concept of modernity, introduced by Charles Baudelaire in the mid-19th century, for in the wake of

industrialization it was technical progress and not artistic progress which had become the measure of all things and was threatening to push art out into the cold once and for all. “When applied to the sphere of the imagination, the notion of progress seems an enormous absurdity.... In the fields of poetry and art, hardly a discoverer has ever had a predecessor. Every blossoming is spontaneous and individual. Did Signorelli indeed give birth to Michelangelo? Did Perugino already contain Raphael? The artist emerges from no one but himself.”[34] Marcel Duchamp, almost a hundred years later, concurred with Baudelaire almost word for word: “Art is produced by different individuals, all expressing their own selves; it is not a matter of progress. Progress is nothing but an enormous impudence on our part. There was no progress, for example, between Corot and Phidias.”[35] There is, however, a significant difference between these two quotations: whereas Baudelaire’s criticism was aimed chiefly at Vasari’s model of master and apprentice, Duchamp’s statement referred to the entire history of Western art, from antiquity to modernism.

The paradoxical “eternal up-to-dateness” of the Readymade cannot be explained inside the art world. The explanation must be sought, rather, in the fact that the conditions resulting from economic and industrial progress still prevail in the modern world and, indeed, precisely demonstrate – to a drastically increasing extent from day to day – the original dictionary definition of the term “ready-made”. That is to say, they are replacing individual products and information by prefabricated, standardized mass production. Not until the world is full of ready-made products does the work of art acquire the status of absolute individuality. This process began with industrialization in the 19th century and is today continuing in all spheres of life: for example, in countries like China, where expensive fast food is being successfully marketed despite this country’s own excellent and low-cost cuisine, or when the Internet is transformed from an individual means of communication into nothing more than a mass advertising medium.

Notwithstanding such advertising strategies which, even in the case of a Big Mac, do not shrink from pretending a false exclusivity based on apparent scarcity, one thing is clear: through the industrial production of objects and information in seemingly inexhaustible quantities, the supply always exceeds the demand. Why, therefore, should the artist be so arrogant as to add even more to this existing excess of things? In this regard, the Readymade principle poses the question: is it not enough to *select* things rather than to produce more of them? In other words, it is *selection* and not *production* which is the answer to an economy of the surplus and uniformity of products.

It is in this sense that the Readymade constitutes the opposite of the technically reproduced work of art, since a mass-produced product, being replaceable at any time by a new one, has no need of reproduction.[36] Whilst in Walter Benjamin's utopian view mass reproduction by means of cinematography and photography would emancipate the work of art from its status of an original, thereby giving it a new social role, the Readymade principle refers to the pure fact of industrial production and reproduction.[37] That the latter may embrace not just products but also images and texts is clearly demonstrated by the parallel "invention" of the Readymade principle in the form of Duchamp's objects and Blaise Cendrars's appropriation of a text from a newspaper. Thus there is no notion of a social utopia behind the Readymade but, rather, the equally banal and existential question as to what forms of expression individuality might still be able to take in the context of an "already ready-made" world.
That this industrial and mass-media process of de-individualization represents the permanent antithesis of modernism has been succinctly expressed by Theodor Adorno: "Art is truly modern when it has the capacity to absorb the results of industrialization under the prevailing conditions of production, while following its own mode of experience and at the same time giving expression to the crisis of experience."[38] And the fact that, with Duchamp's Readymade, this key question of modernism can also be applied to the mass media is corroborated by the Post-modernist Jean-François Lyotard: "The dialectic of the avant-garde may ... be traced back to the challenge which the realisms of mass media industry pose to the art of painting and narration. Duchamp's Readymade actively emphasizes in a parodistic way that process which persists in depriving the artist of his profession and even of his status as an artist."[39] In its development from the "personal experiment" to the celebrated icon of iconoclasm and the remake of its own self, the Readymade has taken the leap from modernism to post-modernism. And, in so doing, it has even gone through the same processes as those which "genuine" industrial products have gone through. Take, for example, blue jeans. These were a non-fashion in the 19th century, an anti-fashion in the sixties of the 20th century, and have meanwhile acquired what seems to be an "eternal" cult status.
Thus it is that, following this last redefinition, the paradoxical "eternal up-to-dateness" of the Readymade must be considered in a context which extends far beyond the context of art. It is a context which begins in the mid 19th century with the invention of photography and the simultaneous inception of department stores offering industrial products at fixed prices, obliging the customer to make his or her choice without haggling over the price;[40] and it ends with the mass media perversion of the utopian equation of art and life, which had its starting

point in the Readymade during the sixties and seventies and culminates in the "reality TV" of today.[41]

Notes

1 TV interview with J. J. Sweeny in 1955, cited in Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography,* New York 1996, p. 393.

2 See also *Übrigens sterben immer die anderen. Marcel Duchamp und die Avantgarde seit 1950,* curated by Dieter Daniels and Alfred M. Fischer, exh. cat. Museum Ludwig, Cologne 1988.

3 Alain Jouffroy, "L'Idée du jugement devrait disparaître", *Arts-Spectacles* 491 (24–30 November 1954), p. 13; see idem, "Die Wiederentdeckung Marcel Duchamps hat unsere Geschichte verändert", in Cologne 1988 (see note 2), p. 107.

4 Vivien Raynor, "A Talk with Robert Motherwell", *Artnews* 73, no. 4 (April 1974), p. 51.

5 Richard Hamilton in the first sentence of his introduction in the exhibition catalogue *The Almost Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp,* Tate Gallery, London, 1966.

6 John Canaday, "Iconoclast, Innovator, Prophet", and Alexander Keneas, "Marcel Duchamp Is Dead at 81; Enigmatic Giant of Modern Art", *The New York Times,* 3 October 1968.

7 See my interview with Jean Tinguely in this catalogue.

8 Pierre Restany, *Yves Klein,* Munich 1982, p. 169.

9 See Roberta Bernstein, *Jasper Johns' Paintings and Sculptures 1954–1974,* Ann Arbor, Mich., 1985, chapter 4.

10 See reprint of Pontus Hulten's letter of 1954 in Cologne 1988 (see note 2), p. 106, and Serge Stauffer's correspondence since 1957 in his publication of Duchamp's writings, *Edition der Schriften Duchamps,* Zurich 1981, p. 251 ff.

11 Duchamp cited in Harriet and Sidney Janis, "Marcel Duchamp – Anti-Artist", in *View* (New York) 5, no. 1 (March 1945), p. 18.

12 See Dieter Daniels, *Duchamp und die anderen,* Cologne 1992, p. 234–273.

13 John Cage cited by Serge Stauffer in Thomas Zaunschirm, *Bereites Mädchen Ready-made,* Klagenfurt 1983, p. 10.

14 Nam June Paik in an interview with Irmeline Lebeer, in *Chroniques de l'art vivant* 55 (February 1975), p. 35. *The Duchamp Effect* is the title of an issue of the magazine *October* which was devoted specifically to the theme of Duchamp's influence on the art of the 20th century (*October,* no. 70, autumn 1994).

15 *Climax in XXth Century Art: 1913–1951,* Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, 1951.
16 Anonymous, "Artist Marcel Duchamp Visits U-classes, Exhibits at Walker", *Minnesota Daily,* 22 October 1965.
17 Concerning the following examples, see Daniels 1992 (see note 12), p. 166–202.
18 See William Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp: Fountain,* Houston 1989.
19 Serge Stauffer was the first to draw attention to Duchamp's contradictory statements concerning the number of Readymades (between thirty and thirty-five or between ten and twelve) in his foreword to Zaunschirm 1983 (see note 13), p. 7. The sporadic eyewitness reports of the twenties make mention of several objects which are no longer considered to be Readymades. See Daniels 1992 (see note 12), p. 190 f.
20 See Jean-Pierre Goldenstein, *Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques de Blaise Cendrars,* Paris 1986, p. 74 ff., with reference to the detailed changes which Cendrars made to the original newspaper report.
21 See Daniels 1992 (see note 12), p. 186 ff.
22 Of all Duchamp's Readymades, only two very unspectacular examples of largely unmodified objects dating from the period of their original conception have survived: the landscape reproduction *Pharmacy* (1914) and the inscribed *Peigne* (Comb, 1916).
23 Cited, in translation, from Bert Bilzer, *Begriffslexikon der Bildenden Künste,* Reinbek 1971, vol. 2, p. 87, under the entry "Ready-made".
24 Donald Judd, *Specific Objects* (1965), in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas,* Oxford and Cambridge, Mass., 1992, vol. 2, p. 811.
25 See Marcel Duchamp in Serge Stauffer, *Marcel Duchamp: Interviews und Statements,* Ostfildern-Ruit 1992, p. 84.
26 One firm, for example, offers – under www.readymade.com – ready-made signs with pre-formulated texts.
27 Robert Morris, *Notes on Sculpture 4: Beyond Objects* (1969), in Harrison/Wood 1992 (see note 24), vol. 2, p. 872.
28 Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy* (1969), in Harrison/Wood 1998 (see note 24), vol. 2, p. 844.
29 See Daniel Buren, *Beware* (1969/70), in Harrison/Wood 1992 (see note 24), vol. 2, p. 856.
30 Art & Language (Terry Atkinson), *Editorial Introduction to Art-Language* (1969), in Harrison/Wood 1992 (see note 24), vol. 2, p. 875 f.

31 Benjamin Buchloh, “Michael Asher und der Abschluss der modernen Skulptur: 1979–1981”, in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Kunsttheorie im 20. Jahrhundert,* Ostfildern-Ruit 1998, vol. 2, p. 110. The discussion on Duchamp’s significance for Conceptual Art continued with undiminished intensity until well into the nineties, as is shown in Seth Siegllaub’s criticism of Buchloh’s “Duchamp fixatio” in the appendix to the second edition of the catalogue *L’art conceptual: Une perspective,* ARC Paris 1990, p. 257 f.

32 Thierry de Duve, *Résonances du Readymade,* Nîmes 1989, p. 132.

33 See conference on *Methods of Understanding in Art and Science: The Case of Duchamp and Poincaré,* Harvard 1999. Jean Clair, Linda Henderson, and Herbert Molderings have been linking Duchamp’s concepts with non-Euclidean geometry and the scientific theories of Poincaré since the seventies.

34 Cited, in translation, from Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes,* ed. Claude Pichois, Paris 1976, vol. 2, p. 580 f. The extent to which this statement is closely bound up with Baudelaire’s theory of art is borne out by the fact that it is repeated almost word for word in his essay on Poe (ibid., p. 325).

35 Duchamp cited in James Johnson Sweeney, “Eleven Europeans in America”, *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* (New York) XIII, no. 4–5 (1946), p. 19.

36 See Marcel Duchamp’s letter to Werner Hofmann, in which he suggests that, for the Hamburg Kunsthalle, Hofmann simply purchase a new bottle rack at the Bazar de l’Hôtel de Ville, which still stocked the same model; in Cologne 1988 (see note 2), p. 76.

37 Other authors also refer to the relationship between the Readymade and photography. According to Thierry de Duve, “the copy [in the case of the Readymade] is ahead of the original”, while for Rosalind Krauss the Readymade conveys, like a snapshot, a “meaningless meaning” as an excerpt from reality. See de Duve 1989 (see note 32), p. 51; and Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths,* Cambridge, Mass., 1985, p. 206.

38 Theodor Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie,* Frankfurt am Main 1973, p. 57.

39 Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmoderne für Kinder,* Vienna 1987, p. 18.

40 On the term “public commodities” and its evolution, see Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man,* New York 1974, pp. 141 ff.

41 For the sequel to this development, see my essay “Big Brother Ready-Made”, in Dieter Daniels, *Medien – Kunst Interferenzen: Vom Ready-made zum Cyberspace,* Ostfildern-Ruit, currently in preparation.