

ETERNAL

CHAPTER 10



NETWORK

PROCESS AESTHETICS, ETERNAL NETWORKS, READY-MADE EVERYDAY ACTIONS AND OTHER POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS DRUGS

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A point that I want very much to establish is that the choice of these “ready-mades” was never dictated by aesthetic delectation. The choice was based on a reaction of *visual indifference* with a total absence of good or bad taste....in fact a complete anesthesia.

I realized soon that the danger of repeating indiscriminately this form of expression and decided to limit the production of “ready-mades” to a small number yearly. I was aware at that time that, for the spectator even more than for the artist, *art is a habit-forming drug* and I wanted to protect my “ready-mades” against such *contamination*.

— Marcel Duchamp¹

In “An Introduction to Dada” originally published as an insert to Robert Motherwell’s influential 1951 edition of *The Dada Painters and Poets*, Tristan Tzara presents a number of statements on the interrelationship posed between art and life that coincide, to an uncanny extent, with Robert Filliou’s 1963 definition of the “Eternal Network.” Tzara insists that participants in Dada “had repudiated all distinction between life and poetry”² and had determined that “the real aim of art (was) integration with the present-day world.”³ Although this posteriori reflection is specific to the actions of a World War I era avant-garde, it further corresponds to myriad mid-century artistic strategies that revolved around the so called “art/life dichotomy” including the environments and happenings of Allan Kaprow, the correspondence networks of Ray Johnson, Fluxus, the Nouveaux Realists, and Arte Povera. Furthermore, an expanding community of contemporary

artists continues to rally around a banner dedicated to the inseparableness of art and life. Tzara explained that participants in Dada sought to integrate art with their present day world because “it seemed to us...that literature and art had become institutions located on the margin of life.”⁴ However, despite the Dadaists’ (and the Surrealists’) attempts to dissolve distinctions between life and poetry, the institution of art’s position within life did not shift closer to center. The proposed marriage lacked prerequisite reciprocity. Life, after all, did not ask to be integrated with art.

First and foremost, mail art networks are “cultures.” In their pure, transitive state (that is to say, outside the museum, gallery, and alternative space system), correspondence works are overtly transactional; they serve as a means by which community itself is established and through which members of the culture interact. However, mail art networks differ from other communities through their self-determined classification as “art” cultures. As a result, participants in contemporary art networks, despite their successful repudiation of all distinction between receiver and art maker, have had little more success moving away from the margin of life than did their early twentieth-century precursors. That such is the case is dependent, to a certain extent, upon their unwillingness to liberate themselves from the myth that the *aesthetic* is exclusively dependent upon *art* and consequently upon the *artist*. Spectator/artist and artist/spectator remain mutually *contaminated* by a self-injected *habit-forming drug*.



Figure 54. Marcel Duchamp. *The Fountain by R. Mutt*, from May 1917 edition of *Little Review* edited by Marcel Duchamp, Henri-Pierre Roché, and Beatrice Wood. Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz. Photo print courtesy of Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts Archive, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.

In early 1913, Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912), a painting that made simultaneous reference to both Cubism and Futurism, was concurrently described as a masterpiece and an "explosion in a shingle factory." The painting was reproduced for sale in postcard

form and featured as the sole illustration to appear on the menu for the Association of American Painters and Sculptors, Inc. March 8th Beefsteak Dinner for their "friends and enemies of the press." Large crowds had regularly gathered around the work as it was exhibited; more often than not, these spectators

were less interested in actively participating in an aesthetic situation than in a media event. "The rude descending a staircase (Rush hour at the subway)" and other caricatures of the painting had appeared in the press, and the *American Art News* had offered a prize to the individual who could locate the nude in the School of Paris piece.⁵ In short, Duchamp's *Nude* had become both symbol of modernity and unchallengeable popular hit of the International Exhibition of Modern Art mounted at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York City, an event that is credited as having served as the American public's tumultuous introduction to the amorphous construct, "twentieth-century European modernism."

It should be noted that the reception of *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* during the 1913 Armory Show was not an art situation that Duchamp orchestrated. Unlike his friend and colleague Francis Picabia, who traveled to America for the exhibition's opening and actively participated in a well-staged dialogue with the mass media, Duchamp's appropriation into the event was dependent upon chance. The show included four works by Marcel Duchamp, five by Raymond Duchamp-Villon, and nine by Jacques Villon. The press, having had its curiosity whetted by the thought of an European avant-garde family, chose to reproduce photographs of the brothers "at home" (that is to say, as they participated in everyday life) in popular Sunday supplements. The public responded well to the promotional prompt and the stage for the subsequent reaction to the painting was artfully set.

Duchamp would eventually become the master of the constructed art situation and of the art of allowing himself to be positioned by others. He would be appropriated by Tristan Tzara into Dada and later by André Breton into

Surrealism and, although he would never become a card-carrying member of either movement, he would come to serve as paradigm for both. Furthermore, Duchamp would leave behind a legacy that continues to deeply affect our waning century and which, barring unforeseen circumstances, promises to continue its impact on the next. In fact one could easily go so far as to insist that it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine the direction that the arts of our own period would have taken without his influence. He would serve as mentor to the composer John Cage (and through him to a new generation of artists including Ray Johnson, Allan Kaprow, and Dick Higgins); would deeply influence Merce Cunningham, Terry Atkinson and the Art-Language group, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg (the precursors to American Pop) and Claes Oldenburg, Richard Hamilton and the British Independent Group, Robert Morris and other Minimalists, the Situationist International, George Maciunas and other Fluxus people, among a host of others. I would posit that one cannot speak of eternal networks, process aesthetics, or any of the other art actions that maintain as their conceptual armature a *purported* insistence upon the inseparableness of art and life without hearing the echo of Duchamp's voice. It would be naive of us to assume, however, that he would have unconditionally approved of these contemporary manifestations of the Duchampian legacy. Aware of the danger of indiscriminate repetition, Duchamp "publicly" withdrew from the art world in 1923 (one decade after his triumph at the Armory Show) and devoted himself to chess.

Duchamp's overt references to chance procedure have left their indelible mark upon his disciples (for example, the integral role that chance plays in most forms of process art). His experiments with language have undeniably

influenced contemporary artists working with performance scores, visual poetry/language works, concept art, etc., as has (at least on the surface) his insistence upon the hegemony of ideas over normative aesthetic titillation. However, it is through his invention/implementation of the concept of the ready-made that he most deeply affected the contemporary arts. That such is the case is ironic in view of the fact that the ready-made is probably the least well understood of Duchamp's transactional activities.

In 1913, the same year that his *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* fortuitously became the pivotal symbol of the New York Armory Show, Duchamp fastened a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool in order to enjoy watching it turn and, a few months later, added green and red dots to the horizon of a commercial print of a winter landscape and retitled the resulting piece *Pharmacy*. In 1914, he purchased a bottle-rack based on his personal response of *visual indifference* to the object. Deliberately chosen in a state of "complete anaesthesia," *Bottle Rack* fulfilled all requirements for what, in 1915, Duchamp would identify as the "ready-made." He would later distinguish between the ready-made, the readymade-aided, and the reciprocal ready-made. In the process, Duchamp provided a potentially dangerous *formula* for succeeding generations of art makers who profess alliance to so-called non-hierarchical "new aesthetic media."

While it is true that Duchamp's ready-mades liberated art making from the representation of nature at a point in time when the issue was of vital importance to the artists, the ready-mades were not about the aestheticization of everyday materials and mass produced objects. They served instead as initiators of art-centered situations—interactions that made direct reference to the fact that Art itself was a

culturally specific, man-made construct. A brief discussion of *Fountain* (1917), one of Duchamp's most well-known ready-mades, and of its subsequent misinterpretation, will hopefully illustrate my contention.

In 1917, Duchamp anonymously submitted a urinal signed by one "R. Mutt" for inclusion in a supposed "unjuried" show mounted by the newly founded Society of Independent Artists in New York. *Fountain* was "shown" behind a curtain and Duchamp resigned in protest, having succeeded in testing the Society's charter. In 1963, Robert Morris produced an assemblage (which made use of everyday materials) in homage to Duchamp. One of Morris's historians writes:

In certain instances, Duchamp's objects provided a scenario for Morris's theatrical games. *Fountain* (1963), a play on Duchamp's ready-made of a urinal placed on its back, consists of an ordinary galvanized steel bucket hung at eye level. *Unlike Duchamp's inverted urinal, Morris's homage does not function as a static object* [emphasis mine]; inside the bucket, and well above the viewers line of vision, water noisily circulates through a pump. What might have been a silent pun on modernist history instead becomes an endless performance piece, a kind of aural *ballet mécanique*.⁶

What is implied in the above statement is quite simply that through his use of artistic privilege, Duchamp "signed" an everyday static object and, in the process, magically transformed it into Art; whereas Morris surpassed his mentor by appending theatricality, performance, and temporality to the process. Nothing could be further from the truth.

While Morris' *Fountain* functioned comfortably within a pre-ordained, sanctified artistic space and was, from its inception, intended to maintain its objectness, Duchamp's ready-made was deliberately intended to serve as merc

catalyst for a cultural interaction. To describe the 1917 *Fountain* as “a static object” is ludicrous, particularly in view of the fact that the piece was not completed until some time after Duchamp removed the urinal from the Society of Independent Artists’ Exhibition. The “exhibition” of the object was but one increment in the collaborative *event* known as “the Richard Mutt Case.” The specifics of how a particular art situation was activated are essential to our understanding of the piece. The event in question was the testing of the charter of the newly established Society of Independent Artists, a charter that Duchamp himself had been instrumental in composing. The urinal merely activated the interaction.

They say any artist paying six dollars may exhibit. Mr. Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion this article disappeared and was never exhibited. What were the grounds for refusing Mr. Mutt’s fountain: 1. Some contended it was immoral, vulgar. 2. Others, it was plagiarism, a plain sheet of plumbing.

This statement appeared as the opening text of *The Blind Man, No 2* (Marcel Duchamp, Henri-Pierre Roche, and Beatrice Wood, eds., New York, May 1917) opposite a beautifully printed photograph of *Fountain* by Alfred Stieglitz. It was through the publication of the little review that the completed piece was realized. Thus, the event is a collaboration between the editors, Stieglitz and others who contributed to the issue. It should be noted that the editors of *The Blind Man* attempted to publish the little magazine without making use of editorial censorship (any article was to be accepted with a contribution of four dollars)⁷ and that the issue devoted to “The Richard Mutt Case: Buddha of the Bathroom” was not

“marketed” through “normal” channels but was distributed by hand.

Robert Morris’ 1963 *Fountain* is housed in a private collection. Duchamp’s 1917 version is no longer extant. (Having served its intended purpose, it quietly disappeared.) There are, however, a number of subsequent editions of the object scattered throughout numerous collections. It could be argued that the later versions lack the *specific* transactional characteristics of the original. Duchamp was aware of this and, in yet another attempt to short-circuit our assumptions about the institution of art, issued the facsimiles as part of his self-professed “whoring period.”

In 1953, Duchamp organized the exhibition, “Dada 1916-1923,” at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, and designed the exhibition catalogue which served as the poster for the show. It was printed on very thin paper and presented to the public at the opening as a crumpled ball of tissue. Included on the poster/exhibition catalogue is a manifesto by Tristan Tzara entitled “DADA vs ART” wherein the poet states:

Dada tried to destroy not so much art as the idea one had of art, breaking down its rigid borders, lowering its imaginary heights—subjecting them to a dependence on man, to his power—humbling art, significantly making it take place and subordinating its value to pure movement which is also the movement of life.

Was not Art (with a capital A) taking a privileged, not to say tyrannical position on the ladder of values, a position which made it sever all connections with human contingencies?

In 1965, on a Fluxus broadside, George Maciunas, the movement’s⁸ primary organizer, published a manifesto which attempted to distinguish between “ART” and “FLUXUS ART-AMUSEMENT.”

ART

To justify artist's professional, parasitic and elite status in society, he must demonstrate artist's indispensability and exclusiveness, he must demonstrate the dependability of audience upon him, he must demonstrate that no one but the artist can do art.

Therefore, art must appear to be complex, pretentious, profound, serious, intellectual, inspired, skillful, significant, theatrical, it must appear to be valuable as commodity so as to provide the artist with an income.

To raise its value (artist's income and patrons' profit), art is made to appear rare, limited in quantity and therefore obtainable and accessible only to the social elite and institutions.

FLUXUS ART-AMUSEMENT

To establish artist's nonprofessional status in society, he must demonstrate artist's dispensability and inclusiveness, he must demonstrate the self-sufficiency of the audience, he must demonstrate that anything can be art and anyone can do it.

Therefore, art-amusement must be simple, amusing, unpretentious, concerned with insignificances, require no skill or countless rehearsals, have no commodity or institutional value.

The value of art amusement must be lowered by making it unlimited, mass-produced, obtainable by all and eventually produced by all.

Fluxus art amusement is the rear-guard without any pretension or urge to participate in the competition of "one-upmanship" with the avant-garde. It strives for the monostructural and nontheatrical qualities of simple natural event, a game or a gag. It is the fusion of Spike Jones, Vaudeville, gag, children's games and Duchamp.⁹

Most participants in Fluxus insist that Maciunas' manifestoes present his own perspective and, thus, are not true "Fluxus Manifestoes." None of the Fluxus people signed the above. That such should be the case is based, in

part, on the fact that the statement outlines a kind of self-destruct mechanism directed not only at Art (with a capital A) but also at the myth of artistic privilege.⁹ In homage to the late and talented impresario of Fluxus (the movement that is credited as having served as direct progenitor of contemporary Eternal Networks) we should keep in mind that having purportedly liberated ourselves from hierarchical definitions of *great Art*, we run the risk of being left with little other than *great Artists* and famous "signatures." To do less would simply not be keeping it honest. In his "Dada Manifesto 1918" Tzara claimed that "morality is an injection of chocolate into the veins of all men."¹⁰ So too is art, it would seem, at least for its makers.

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1. Marcel Duchamp, cited in Hans Richter, *Dada Art and Anti-Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1978, p. 89.
2. Tristan Tzara, "An Introduction to Dada," in Robert Motherwell, *The Dada Painters and Poets*, Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 402.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 405.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 403.
5. For an in-depth discussion of the International Exhibition of Modern Art, see Milton W. Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, New York: the Joseph H. Hirschhorn Foundation, 1963. The winning entry for the *American Art News'* contest is entitled, "It's Only a Man" and is reproduced on p. 110.
6. Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s*, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1989, p. 34. Despite his unfortunate misinterpretation of the transactional nature of Duchamp's ready-made, Berger's analysis of his subject is both intelligent and informed by the best intentions. In his introduction to the text, the author makes clear that his own perspective stands outside "formalism's aestheticization of the object." See "Introduction: Robert Morris Outside Art History," p. 5.
7. See "I Shock Myself": Excerpts from the Autobiography of Beatrice Wood," in *Arts Magazine, Special Issue, New York Dada and the Arensburg Circle*, May 1977, L1: 9, p. 136.
8. I am fully aware that surviving members of the Fluxus community insist that Fluxus was not a movement. Dick Higgins.

for example, uses the term “tendency” in his attempts to distinguish Fluxus from earlier movements such as Dada and Surrealism. This is not a new strategy, however. In the late Teens and early Twenties, Tristan Tzara, Dada’s primary impresario, professed a similar insistence that the World War I era movement was not a movement but a constellation of individuals. In fact, the term “tendency” appears in his “DADA vs ART” manifesto which was published in the 1953 Sidney Janis catalogue/poster:

It should be noted—and this is a trait common to all *tendencies* [emphasis mine]—that the artistic means of expression lose, with Dada, their specific character. These means are interchangeable, they may be used in any form of art and moreover may employ incongruous

elements—materials noble or looked down upon, verbal clichés, or clichés of old magazines, bromides, publicity slogans, refuse, etc.

Tzara also makes reference to Duchamp’s experiments with chance procedure and to his discovery of the ready-made in the manifesto.

9. It is important to note that few of Maciunas’ co-participants in Fluxus would have defended Art’s privileged and “tyrannical position on the ladder of values.” None the less, fewer still were able to liberate themselves from the assumption that the Artist’s experience of the everyday is somehow more valuable, and thus deserving of attention, than similar experiences of “non-professionals.”

10. Reproduced in Motherwell, p. 81.

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