

BLACK COFFEE

Marcel Duchamp's pataphysical sensism

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Duchamp's readymade is usually interpreted as a bold and cerebral emancipation of modern art from the material, the craft and natural beauty, and the discovery of the continent of conceptual art. Duchamp however was very sceptical and made fun of abstract reasoning, concepts and theories. This essay states that Duchamp ostensibly found inspiration with Alfred Jarry's work and particularly his 'neo--science' of pataphysics, like many dadaists, futurists, surrealist did around 1910. And that he did so openly. Beyond art and the possibility of conceptual art lies the pataphysical, the vast and rich realm of the senses. Duchamp's interest was not in concepts or ideas, his drive was towards the virtual, ambiguous, irrational side of perception. All we have is the senses, the unique moments, the unique objects and bodies, our memories, and what the chaotic abundance of information they give us means, is unknown. Probably nothing. Duchamp thought that all science, art, religion, madness, literature and philosophy are creative efforts starting from tautologies; he was no conceptualist but a radical 'sensist'.

In his special (1905) and general (1915) theories of relativity Albert Einstein stated, as a new and improved explanation of the force of gravity, that space and time were no absolute quantities, and that it could be proven that they were functionally related to mass and impulse. In other words, the position and movement of the observer and the influence of mass determine the nature of space-time and the behavior of bodies in it. In the Einsteinian universe space and time form a single continuum, matter and energy are just different manifestations of the basic particles and forces. This theory resolutely reduces our 'natural', everyday understanding of matter, gravity and time to an arbitrary and limited view of things, only normal in our cute and minute corner of the universe.

Beginning with his entry of the reversed urinal (titled *Fountain*) under the pseudonym of R. Mutt for the Armory Show 1917 in New York (where it was excluded from the exhibition), and continuing with his other readymades, the Great Glass, the boxes with notes (Green and White), and the series of boxes with his collected works reproduced in miniature, Marcel Duchamp developed what I call (not a theory, rather) a practice of relativity, not pertaining to gravity, but to art. A practice of aesthetic relativity.

The naive way to explain gravity is to think a planet works like a magnet and pulls everything down, to its centre. Pretty similar to the common idea of how art works: a crafted object is charged with meaning by the intentional expression of the artist. The visual beauty achieved by his skill and originality functions like a wave transporting meaning and feeling from art work to spectator.

In Duchamp's practice a work of art is first and foremost approached as a node in a network of relations. Relations between material, form and color, between artist and work, between spectator and artist, among spectators, between physical space and the work of art, between sign and meaning, in other words all the physical, social, cultural and economic elements that make up the context in which the work of art appears as a node, an act, a move. An act that is always an assemblage, a set of related elements, a balance of forces, a series of decisions, a multiplicity of meaning. That is true of an oil painting, a lithography, a text, a musical composition, a collage, a play or a photograph, a urinal as sculpture, or a haircut. Art is a category of human activity, not a qualitative term; there is bad art, good art and indifferent art.

A work of art appears in a vast continuum of relations. And this field of relations is a level playing field: no relation is a priori dominant over any other. There is no hierarchy. Handmade or machine produced, carefully drawn or the result of chance, using vulgar or art historical allusions, permanent or ephemeral, targeted at one spectator, a specific individual even or appealing to the millions; these are all equally valid operations an artist has at his disposal, they are all tools to construct a work of art. They are all potential forms of the relations a work of art embodies, amplifies, contorts or excludes. It is a practical, provocatively non-judgemental attitude towards art. It accomplishes a shift of paradigm in art comparable to the jump from Newton to Einstein in physics.

With *Fountain* (1917) Duchamp showed that everything could be a work of art, even the most improbable object (a mass produced urinal). He transformed the urinal into a work of art by choosing it as a sculpture to enter an art exhibition. He said he didn't choose it out of aesthetic appreciation, thereby showing that not even skill or aesthetic considerations are necessary requirements for art. They can (though not always) make art better, but what

Duchamp calls the creative act or art does not depend on them. There is an infinite continuum of art in a raw state, that can be presented to spectators in the form of acts, consisting of visible, audible, tactile, permanent or ephemeral elements. The spectators, each of them from their own perspective and frame of reference, complete the creative act by distilling the raw art into a personal aesthetic effect. Without spectators there can be no work of art. Duchamp once said he hoped the plumbing industry would develop a faucet that stopped dripping as soon as the inhabitants left the building. That is how a dripping faucet can become art. Spectators transform the work of art from inert matter into a work of art; they realize the many possible effects and meanings an art work has. With Duchamp arrives the radical democracy of criticism: every spectator becomes a critic, some more influential or convincing than others, some learned and profound, others ignorant or crazy, but not categorically different. There is no true or false, no pure or impure, no right or wrong. The artist made the work of art possible, the spectators completed it: they made it work and live. Duchamp dryly noted that most art loses its effect after about forty years, and just doesn't work anymore for people, but that it is possible that dead art is re-discovered and brought back to life. Seen from a new perspective the work of art jolts back into life again.

From a traditional point of view Duchamp's relativistic practices were a parody and a dismantling of the value of art. He dissolved and mocked the holy trinity of beauty, skill and material, and showed their relative influence, thereby debunking their mystique. It seemed art had lost its sacred, exceptional quality, its magic. The link between status and art, between culture and morality was deliberately broken by his pseudo-scientific level headedness. There are critics, who to this day, interpret Duchamp's interventions as championing cynicism, a nihilistic view of art that is blind to beauty and basically a form of intellectual aggression against craft, feeling and nature. His influence is often seen as initiating the vulgarization of the sacred value of art, turning it into a clever, superficially spectacular media show. The artist appears as a trickster, a provocateur and an impostor. The jury wrote in its refusal of *Fountain* at the Armory Show that it suspected the work was presented 'in bad faith'. Quite accurate, Duchamp's objective was to baffle, reverse, test and mock the ruling aesthetic articles of faith. Duchamp was no believer, rather an irreverent explorer of art. Without protesting or objecting to anything, his relativistic art practice made it conceivable anything anywhere anytime could be a poetic act, a work of art, be it bad, scandalous, brilliant, tasteless, popular, temporary or private. His art practice was down to earth and fundamentally sceptic: to him the mythology of High Art was just as limiting and superstitious as the sentiments and conventions of popular taste in entertainment, fashion, design or advertising.

Duchamp's fame rose from his arrival in the USA in 1915, dwindled in the thirties, almost disappeared in the early fifties, but rose again spectacularly in the sixties. He is now considered to be one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. Up there with Picasso and Mondriaan. In the artistic pantheon he has been typecast as the godfather of the conceptualist strain in 20th century art. As the one who despised the sensualism of painter-animals, who intellectualized and contextualized everything until it became a joke, arrogantly outwitting everybody, preferably by confusing them with cold erotic symbolism. For quite a while this image appealed to artists who wanted to become famous by rebelling against good taste and cosy bourgeois ideas about art. But in the 21st century nobody is interested anymore in deconstructions of aesthetic ideology or subtle mockery of the social and economic brouhaha concerning art. What made Duchamp's art scandalous (introduction of the banal, chance, explicit eroticism, the readymade, the intellectual link to physics and technology) no longer does so. What remains is the heroism of conceptualism, reduced to intellectualism, as the last version of the romantic artist: the avant garde rebel. That is a caricature of Duchamp and his work.

The worst understood phrase of Duchamp that keeps being repeated is the one in which he says he is not interested in retinal painting. The conceptualists cheer for their immaterialist hero, the Duchamp-haters shake their head at so much utter disdain for the subtle wonders of the visual world and painting. I think what Duchamp meant was, that he was not interested in painting that did not question and explore perception, and treated visual information as something pure received out of nature by the retina, and then artistically played around with. Perception is a coproduction of senses and the brain, which means that feelings, memories, sounds and smells, habits, phobias and above all language influence what we see or think we see. Painting that ignores this interplay of senses and mental functions, these bodily, sensory reactions to the social, physical and cultural context we live in, is uninteresting to him.

Which does not mean he is more interested in what can be thought, than in what can be seen, heard, felt and tasted and smelled? Far from it. All the things that can be called intellectual, cultural, mental, spiritual are effects provoked by material, sensory qualities of the work of art. There is no way to work outside of this continuum of complex relations between senses, language, memory and desire that is perception. Artists manipulate perception. Artists who think they can extricate their work from this continuum, believe in the purity of seeing, in the sanctity of the retina, the immediate contact with nature and reality. Which is an idealistic illusion, a pretentious fairy tale. Perception

may be an interplay between senses, language, memory and situation, it is not an entirely conscious, let alone a rational process. Duchamp called himself a literal nominalist. He is not so much concerned with concepts, general and abstract notions, but applies all his attention and intuition meticulously to color, material, texture, design, occasion, location etc.

When he had to choose the method by which he would reproduce his paintings in the *Boîte en valise*, he picked an old fashioned, cumbersome printing process that involved tin stencils to separate the colors. His collaboration with the craftsman he employed for this was so complicated and time consuming that you could say that he had to redo the paintings all over again, but in another medium, on a smaller scale, thirty years later. Art and craft, original and copy, handmade and machine made, the young man and the middle aged artist all got blurred in this long process that was hard to control. He made sure the reproductions were 'unique' and complex. His individually produced series of boxes were many things at the same time: a portable alternative for a museum exhibition, an ironic investigation into the intricacies and subtleties of painstakingly copying your own work, but also a very practical way to publicize and sell his work to survive as an artist. For every series of boxes he made adaptations and additions and often produced an original specifically for the buyer. The most famous one seems to me a perfect example of Duchamp's idea for art as activating the senses and the mind beyond the set of rules and conventions of the 'picture': on a fond of night blue silk we see a pale white blot, consisting of dried up semen. The work is for Maria Martins, a former lover, and though you might guess the explicit erotic nature of the object, it visually suggests the Milky Way as seen on a clear summer's night as well as a woman's evening dress being ejaculated on. The effect is shocking, comic, sexy, romantic and intriguing, as you are tempted to speculate on the nature of the shape of the blot of semen; does it resemble a leaping animal? Or a falling clown with a big head? After a while a sense of melancholy and lonely reminiscing creeps in, as you imagine yourself being the artist.

Remarkably for the godfather of conceptualism, Duchamp kept his work far away from theories, philosophies, social science or art historical speculation. The art he was interested in might enthusiastically activate the mind and involve language, it was certainly not the product of rational thought. As a literal nominalist he saw little value in theory when it came to art. An artist worked by observation, intuition, subjective even secretive methods and most of the effects his work had on spectators were unintentional and unpredictable. In fact, the power of rational thought, which controlled the world and people by subsuming all individuals and moments to general concepts and categories, and reducing life to clear cut rules, causes and

procedures was probably Duchamp's greatest enemy. He was escaping the dulling effect of common sense as eagerly as the romantic and high minded theories of the art world.

While industrial and mass society boomed, Duchamp sat in his studio basically refusing to be productive, to work in the regular sense of the word, even as an artist. His studio was a no man's land between art and society, between the world of codified beauty and productivity/common sense. The rules and conventions of both the art world and the world of utility and profit were far away. In this humble interzone he could be free of both and follow his curiosity, explore the effects of his transcendental laziness. You could say his aim was to arrive at things that were completely useless and for which it didn't matter if they were art or not, but that were engaging, exciting, full of virtual meaning, ideas, experiences, inventions and that were one of a kind, unique and contained, as much as possible, his view of life and the world.

Turning a urinal, a moving bicycle wheel on a stool or a bottle rack into a readymade is the simplest way to peel away the aura of usefulness, their aspect of mass product and reveal them as objects, as unique bodies of matter, as generators of sensory experiences. When our eyes and minds are flipped into art-mode our attention to detail is enhanced, we are not in a hurry and take the time to process different perspectives, we suppress our reflex judgements, our hunger for conclusions and straightforward univocal meaning. When we open up our minds and focus on our senses like that a snow shovel titled *in advance of the broken arm*, becomes a 'possible'. When we approach every object, every situation, everyone this way, we are exactly where Duchamp wants to have us.

This is a position that can best be described as pataphysical. Alfred Jarry (a French author, 1873-1907) developed this *science* as a method for his literary work, but it has proven to be inspiring for many artists, authors, composers since then. Where traditional science aims at describing the general laws of nature, pataphysics looks for the laws that govern exceptions. A pataphysician studies epiphenomena that reveal possible parallel worlds. Duchamp himself offers the best examples, first with the readymade that explores the exception even in a mass produced series, and second with his *Three Standard Stoppages*: three of the infinite alternatives to the standard meter obtained by dropping a string from a height of one meter. With this simple act the measurability of the world is virtualized. Another beautiful example of the study of epiphenomena is Duchamp's notion of the *infra mince*, best described by examples such as the difference in volume between a clean shirt and a shirt worn once, or the marriage of smells when tobacco smoke also smells of the mouth it is leaving.

Also circumscribed by Jarry in his neo-scientific novel *Gestes et opinions du Dr Faustroll*, *pataphysicien* as the 'the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes to the lineaments of objects the properties described by

their virtuality,' pataphysics has an irreverent and playful attitude towards science and technology, producing inventions of a fantastical nature. Duchamp mentioned his admiration for the weird machines in the novels and plays by Raymond Roussel, that inspired him, but many of the pseudo-mechanical images (bachelor machines) in and around the Great Glass echo also to Jarry's electro-mechanical sex robot in *Le Sûrmaie*. Other works that can be seen as a pataphysical inventions are Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs*, where he explored the outer limits of visual perception. They consist of glass plates with graphic stripes or spheres painted with spirals fixed on a central axle that rotates so fast they produce images that are perceptible and virtual at the same time. The Ur-symbol for pataphysics, by the way, is the spiral.

According to pataphysics all meaning we attribute to what we sense is of the same order, the theory of a madman is only gradually different from science or religion, opposites disappear into each other and all knowledge is creative, be it paranoia or fiction. Dr Faustroll's side kick on board his skiff in Jarry's novel is a humanoid baboon, Bosse de Nage, who comments on everything with the tautological wise crack HaHa.

The link I highlight between Jarry's pataphysics and Duchamp's work could be seen as yet another way to emphasize the aspect of the clever jester, the deliberately annoying and deconstructing saboteur of what appears certain, serious and significant. That is not why I bring it up. What I propose is to see Duchamp's work as a strategy to clear our minds of abstract opinions, pompous ideals and cheap certainties that poison our perception and limit our experience of life and art. By saying no to them, he is saying yes to the infinite and wondrous possibilities of our sensory experiences, of what we can see, hear, smell, feel, taste. It reminds me of the attitude of a sceptic, (we can think of Pyrrho of Elis, from the third century BC, a Greek ex-painter turned philosopher who travelled with Alexander's army to India and got acquainted with the wandering naked wise fools, or sadhu's) who undercuts all claims to certain knowledge, not to win an philosophical argument, but to improve life by shutting up the voices around and inside himself that explain and judge everything. The desired result is an agile, curious and open mind, enjoying and investigating the world and life as it appears to our senses.

In the last conversation Pierre Cabanne had with Duchamp for his book of interviews the artist refers to the logicians of the Viennese Circle. 'They worked out a system wherein everything is, as far as I understood it, a tautology, that is, a repetition of premises. In mathematics it goes from a very simple axiom to a very complicated one, but it's all in the first theorem. So, metaphysics: tautology; religion: tautology: everything is tautology except black coffee, because the senses are in control! The eyes see the black coffee, the senses are in control, it's a truth; but the rest is always tautology.'