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## MARCEL DUCHAMP AND THE ART OF EXHIBITION MAKING

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Marcel Duchamp made his first readymade over a century ago: a deceptively simple gesture that would turn the art world upside down. The core of artistic practise no longer lies in creating, but in selecting and displaying. But selecting and displaying are also the core tasks of the independent curator. Duchamp already proved in the 1930's how powerful an exhibition maker can be. A power struggle arose: who gives meaning to art, the curator or the artist?

Never kick a seemingly discarded wad of paper out of your way when you're in a museum: you might be destroying a precious piece of art. Over the last century, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish art from non-art. Quite often the only reason that you recognize an object as art, is because it sits in a museum gallery. In the light of these developments, the exhibition context has gained a lot of importance. Making exhibitions has become a form of art. But who is the author: the artist or the curator? A real power struggle is unfolding in the art world, which over the last century grew into a billion-dollar industry. For her Master Thesis in Museum Curating, art historian Marian Cousijn did research on the origin of this power struggle, which lies with the practise of Marcel Duchamp.

In 2013 I visited one of the most important art exhibitions in the world: the Venice Biennial. Despite my education in art history and a well-trained eye, I found myself in doubt quite often: is this supposed to be

an artwork? A hand truck placed in dialogue with a fire extinguisher in an otherwise empty museum gallery, a moped parked in front of the Swiss pavilion, a satellite receiver on the rooftop of the Russian pavilion. Piece by piece functional objects that don't have much in common with our traditional idea of art. But who is confronted with modern and contemporary art on a regular base, might understand my confusion. (The moped and the satellite receiver turned out to actually be artworks, whereas the other objects were nothing more than an ordinary hand truck and a fire extinguisher).

The artist responsible for me suspecting a simple fire extinguisher of being an artwork is Marcel Duchamp. In 1914 he bought a bottle rack and placed it in his studio. He considered it a ready-made sculpture. Three years later, he sent in a normal urinal, tilted and signed R. Mutt, for an exhibition. Contrary to popular belief, it caused no major scandal at the time: the urinal was not even considered to be exhibited. It would take decades before it became clear that Duchamp was behind this work, and what the consequences would be of perhaps the most radical work of art of the past century.

The concept of readymades changed the course of recent art history dramatically. In his essay *Politics of Installation*, philosopher Boris Groys summarizes it concisely: 'The traditional division of labour within the art system was clear. Artworks were to be produced by artists and then selected and exhibited by curators. But, at least since Duchamp, this division of labour has collapsed. Today, there is no longer any 'ontological' difference between making art and displaying art. In the context of contemporary art, to make art is to show things as art'.

The confusion that Duchamp has sown, is still palpable. Over the past century the boundaries of artistic practice have expanded and making exhibitions has become a crucial part of it. Paradoxically, in parallel to this development we see the rise of the independent curator, who considers making exhibitions as his or her autonomous creative practise.

### **The rise of the curator**

Group exhibitions have become one of the most important forms of cultural expression. Besides the relevance of exhibitions in museums, as a result of globalization and decentralization the influence of temporary mega exhibitions like biennials also increased. No longer the centre of

the art world is one city, such as Paris or New York. Cities all over the world, from Gwangju to Sao Paulo, organize major biennials in the competition for the attention of nomadic art professionals with in their wake wealthy tourists and real estate developers. The influence of a powerful curator extends across all facets of contemporary art structures. He or she selects works, places them in a context, and thus creates a meaning for them.

Since the 1970's, the creative independent curator gained the status of author. They build on an oeuvre of exhibitions, with their own distinct handwriting. Within a relatively short time these players have managed to gain a firmly dominant position within the art field, somewhere between critics, gallery owners and museum curators.

When an artist is selected for a prominent biennial, the prices for their work can suddenly rise to astronomical heights on the overheated art market. Additionally, 'curated' has become a big term in a broader cultural context. In an affluent society, which is oriented towards demand rather than supply, the art of choosing has become a valuable thing. Especially since the rise of the Internet, there is a need for someone who can make a meaningful choice from the overwhelming amount of options the world has to offer. Someone who has made his profession of selecting: the curator. It is therefore not surprising that artists are also becoming increasingly aware of the exhibition context in relation to their work.

The boundary between the artistic practice of the artist and the professional practice of curating can be quite blurry. This symbiotic relationship leads to a power struggle for autonomy: who creates meaning, the artist or the curator? This question at its core can be traced back to the actions of Duchamp, a little over a century ago.

### **Art in Duchamp's times**

Duchamp's strategies were radical for his time, considering visual arts only recently acquired an autonomous status. Until the nineteenth century being an artist meant having a clearly defined profession, with the aim of imitating reality and creating (decorative) beauty.

While art could be judged in a classical-aesthetic manner ('this is a beautiful artwork' or 'this artwork is badly painted'), the question was never whether something was even an artwork at all.

Things changed drastically with the rise of modernism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Artists gained a particular social status and would create

art for art's sake, which meant that the art was evaluated purely on its intrinsic qualities.

In *Kant after Duchamp* art theorist Thierry de Duve explains how the qualification 'art' became a quality label itself. Instead of 'this is bad art', people would now say, for example of Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* and Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*: 'this is not art'.

Gradually, classical criteria such as sculptural quality or workmanship lost relevance and the judgment on the beauty of a urinal was no longer linked to the question of whether it was regarded as an art work.

### **Duchamp's moves**

Against this background Duchamp made his first radical moves. He co-organized the 'First Exhibition of Independent Artists' (1917) in New York, which did not have a selection committee: everyone could send in art works and everything would be exhibited. All contributors were regarded artists for they would contribute an art work, and all submitted art works were regarded as art because they were contributed by artists. Duchamp decided to take this circular reasoning to the test and sent in a urinal under the pseudonym Richard Mutt. From all 2125 pieces submitted by 1235 'artists', it was the only one that would not be displayed.

It was not until the 1960's that the influence of readymades would start to become noticeable. Despite the delay in reception, this invention ensured that no longer creating, but choosing came to be central to artistic activity. This even applies for painting, Duchamp argued: 'Making something is choosing a tube of blue, a tube of red [...] and always choosing the quality of the blue, the quality of the red, and always choosing the place to put it on the canvas, it's always choosing... Choice is the main thing, even in normal painting. [...] The word 'art' means to make and to make is to choose and always to choose'.

It is less known that Duchamp was not only a pioneer as an artist but also as an exhibition maker. Around 1940 he declared that he permanently ceased creating art to focus on playing chess. But actually he kept working steadily on a very influential body of work. Patiently, thoughtfully looking ahead, he was basically playing a game of chess with the art world.

Duchamp was involved in the organization of two influential exhibitions, which may be considered as installation art *avant la lettre*. In

1938 he organized, together with among others Man Ray, the 'Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme' in Paris. He did exactly the opposite of what an exhibition maker was supposed to do in accordance with modernist conventions: creating a space as neutral as possible, where one could enjoy the art undisturbed.

Upon entering the exhibition, the visitor was immediately confronted with Dali's bizarre *Rainy Taxi*, an overgrown taxi in which it rained on two life-sized dolls that were covered in live snails. Next, they would walk through a corridor full of weirdly dressed mannequins before entering the alienating main space of the exhibition. The ceiling, which was usually high, light and neutral, was now packed with jute sacks of coal. In the resulting dark and low space, the visitors had to find their way with flashlights, whose light beams would give away exactly where one was looking. Which could be anything: there was a pile of leaves laying on the floor, there was a pond with surrounding reeds, beds stood in the corners of the room. The paintings? They were decoratively mounted on revolving doors from a department store.

Duchamp's exhibition design was extremely dominant – he appropriated the entire room, including the art works by other artists, which were more or less downgraded to decoration materials.

Four years later he repeated this move, when putting together an exhibition in New York with André Breton and Peggy Guggenheim. Again, he made a radical gesture: throughout the entire room a string rope was stretched out, which made moving through the exhibition and even looking at the paintings practically impossible. During the opening of the exhibition young kids were running around. They had been instructed by Duchamp to make as much noise as possible.

Through playing with conventions, he again appropriated the entire exhibition, as its ultimate author. The other artists' paintings became a backdrop for Duchamp's tangle of rope, which just like the coal sacks entered art history as an autonomous art work.

### **The artist as curator and the curator as artist**

These days Duchamp's strategies are applied not only by artists, but also by many curators. This leads to friction: a neutral object can acquire meaning as artwork because it is selected and exhibited by the artist. This fact quickly leads to the misconception that a curator, whose core

business also exists of selecting and presenting, is able to create art just as well.

However, although a lot of art depends heavily on its presentation context – which is created by the curator – ultimately it's only the artist has sovereign power to declare an object art. A curator cannot create a work of art by simply including it in an exhibition.

Yet it remains a grey area. The symbiotic relation between curators and artists, who are mutually dependent, can lead to conflicts. Already in the early 1970's, artist Daniel Buren published a critical manifesto based on his experience collaborating with curator Harald Szeemann in which he notes that artists and their works are being overshadowed by curators: 'Even if the artwork was formerly revealed thanks to the museum, it now serves as nothing more than a decorative gimmick for the survival of the museum as tableau, a tableau whose author is none other than the exhibition organizer'.

### **Installation art as appropriation of the exhibition**

Installation art provides a solution for artists as a way to demand autonomy within an exhibition. Within the limits of an artistic installation, the artist has absolute power. When the wall colour or hanging height are defined in the installation instructions, they are in fact part of the artwork, which means that a curator can not change them without explicitly violating of the autonomy of the artwork.

Many art historians view Duchamp's work as the ultimate precursor to installation art. On his latest creation, *Étant Donnés*, he worked for years in secret. The piece can be considered an extremely compulsory act of curating. The only possible way to view the artwork is through two small peepholes in a large wooden door. When the viewer peeks through, he or she is confronted with a nude female figure lying on her back, her legs apart.

The power over the way the work is exhibited lies wholly with Duchamp. Because of the extremely compelling peep show box structure, the viewer has no other option but to view the work exactly in the manner proposed by the artist. It's not even possible to choose a different angle or viewing distance to the artwork. Regardless of the institutional context in which the work is displayed; Duchamp was and remains the ultimate director of the manner in which the work is exhibited. There is no curator who can change anything about that.

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