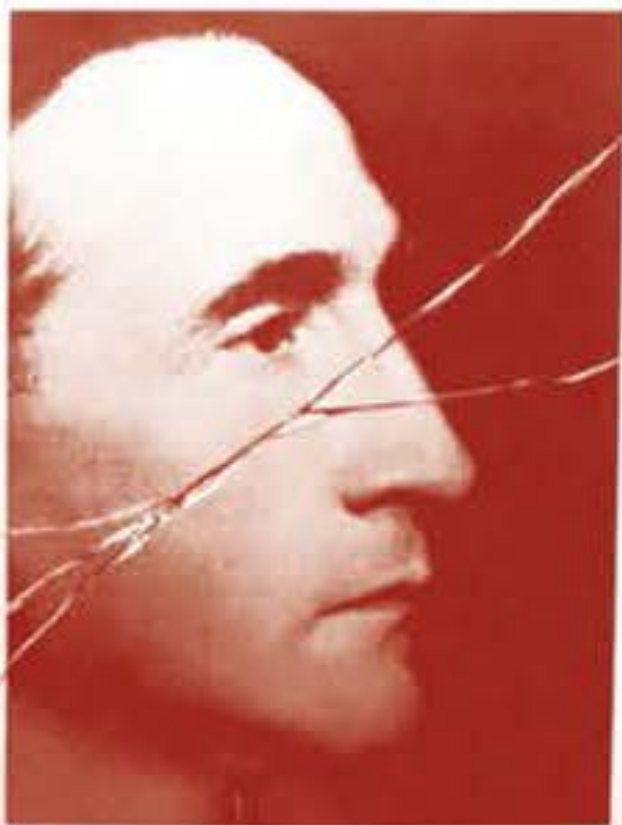


MARCEL DUCHAMP AND THE REFUSAL OF WORK

Maurizio Lazzarato

Translated by Joshua David Jordan



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“You cannot afford to be a young man who doesn’t do a thing. Who doesn’t work? You can’t live without working, which is a terrible thing. I remember a book called *The Right to Be Lazy*; that right doesn’t exist now.”

“You prefer life to the work of the artist?” “Yes,” Marcel replied.

Marcel Duchamp remarks somewhere that while “John Cage boasts of having introduced silence into music, I’m proud of having celebrated laziness in art.”¹ Duchamp’s “great laziness” shook the art world more radically and durably than the profusion of activity of a Picasso with his 50,000 works.

Duchamp maintained an obstinate refusal of both artistic and wage-earning work, refusing to submit to the functions, roles, and norms of capitalist society. He did more than challenge the definitions of art and the artist.

Inasmuch as his refusal differs from the 1960s Italian Operaist “refusal of work,” Duchamp helps us to understand the insistent refusals voiced in the streets and city squares around the world since 2008 (in Turkey, Brazil, Spain, the US, and elsewhere).

On the one hand, Duchamp extends his refusal beyond the standard definitions of work to encompass not only paid labor but every function and role society assigns (woman/man, consumer, user, unemployed, etc.). Like the vast majority of roles and functions, the artist is not bound to an employer but to a range of apparatuses of power. As “human capital,” which the artist himself has ironically come to epitomize under neoliberalism, he too must submit to “external” powers as well as to the hold over his “ego” (a creative ego assigned to the human capital of artist and entrepreneur alike, one which instills in both the illusion of being free).

On the other hand, Duchamp encourages us to conceive of and exercise a “refusal of work” which constitutes an ethical-political principle that goes beyond work, which frees us from the enchanted circle of production, productivity, and producers. This stands in contrast to the communist tradition, in which the notion of work has always been at once the strength and the weakness. Is the objective emancipation from work or emancipation through it? Nothing has resolved the confusion.

The workers’ *movement* existed only because the strike is simultaneously a renunciation, a *non-movement*, a radical

désœuvrement,² an unworking or inaction, and a suspension of production which interrupt the roles, functions, and hierarchies of the factory's division of labor. Problematizing a sole aspect of the struggle—"movement"—proved a major obstacle from the start because it made the workers' movement a catalyst of productivism and industrialization and turned workers into eulogists of their own enslavement. With neoliberalism, the flip side of the struggle—the "refusal of work," non-movement, or inaction—has either been ignored or inadequately problematized.

The refusal of work has thus always referred to something else, to politics in the guise of the party or State. Instead, Duchamp asks us to hold with the refusal itself, with non-movement and demobilization. He invites us to develop and experiment with all the possibilities that "lazy action" creates in order to carry out a reconversion of subjectivity, to invent new techniques of existence and new ways of living time. Feminist movements, by refusing to exercise the functions—and work of—"women," have in general followed this strategy rather than the classical political one. However, the anthropology of the workers' refusal remains by and large an anthropology of work; class subjectivation remains always that of "workers" and "producers." Laziness points to an entirely different anthropology and to an ethics of a completely different kind. By undermining the very foundations of "work," laziness not only thwarts "producer" identities, it undoes sexual identities as

well. The anthropology of modernity itself—the subject and individual “man,” the freedom and universality of “man”—is consequently put into question.

The communist movement had the opportunity, however, to create an anthropology and ethics whose aim was not a present dominated by hard work. It could have invented processes of subjectivation that weren't centered on producers. In *The Right to Be Lazy* (1880), written as a refutation of Louis Blanc's “right to work,” Paul Lafargue drew inspiration from the *otium* of classical antiquity. It was precisely the latter that the communists should have considered in light of slavery's democratization through waged labor. But they failed to see what Marx's son-in-law Lafargue had rediscovered, namely, the ontological and political implications inherent in the suspension of activity and authority. They thus missed the chance to move beyond the model of *homo faber*, beyond the vainglorious producer and the promethean promise of mastery over nature that the model implies. Duchamp, on the other hand, exploited the radicality of inactivity. For the right to be lazy, “a right, without your having to give an account or an exchange,” challenges the three mainstays of capitalist society. First of all, laziness undermines exchange: “who invented the concept of exchanging? Why should one exchange on even terms?”³ “In today's society it's become a law, with gendarmes enforcing relationships between individuals.” Second, and still more profoundly, laziness threatens property, the bedrock of exchange: “For that

matter, possession—the idea of exchange presupposes possession in the proprietary sense of the word.”⁴ Finally, laziness undercuts the primacy of labor. For Marx, labor is the living basis of property because property is nothing other than objectivized work. If you want to deal a mortal blow to property, says Marx, you have to attack it not only as an objective condition but also as an activity, as work. The right to laziness, on the other hand, subverts, one by one, exchange, property, and work and does so outside the Marxist tradition.

1. The Refusal of (Artistic) Work

Duchampian laziness lends itself to two readings. It represents a socio-economic critique and at the same time constitutes a “philosophical” category. It discloses new dimensions of existence and new forms of life which compel us to rethink action, time, and subjectivity.

Let us start with the socio-economic critique. Laziness is not simply a “non-action” or a “minimal-action.” It involves taking a position with respect to the conditions of existence under capitalism. First of all, it affirms a subjective refusal of (paid) work and of all the forms of conformist behavior capitalist society demands. It is a rejection of “all those little rules that dictate you won’t get food if you don’t show signs of activity or production of some kind.” Beuys denounced Duchamp’s “overrated silence”⁵ on social and political issues; and most critics of

Duchamp find in him no lack of contradictions. He himself for that matter admitted he never stopped contradicting himself in order to avoid getting stuck in established systems, tastes, and thought. But if there is something that systematically reappears and to which he remains faithful throughout his life, it is his refusal of work and his commitment to lazy action. Together they make up the common ethical-political threads of his existence.

Might it be possible to live as a mere occupant, paying nothing and possessing nothing? [...] This brings us back to the right to laziness suggested by Paul Lafargue in a book that really struck me around 1912. It still seems to me today quite legitimate to challenge the forced labor that even newborns are subjected to.⁶

No generation in the history of humanity has sacrificed so much time to work than those generations whose misfortune it has been to be born under capitalism. Capitalism has condemned humanity to forced labor, regardless of the level of productivity achieved. Rather than freeing us from work, every technical, social, and scientific innovation has only tightened its control over temporality.

I'm no fascist, but I think democracy hasn't brought us much of anything rational. [...] It's shameful we're still obliged to work simply in order to survive [...], obliged to work to exist—it really is a disgrace.⁷

The Home for the Lazy ("Home for Adult Lazies / Orphanage for Young Lazies") Duchamp wanted to open, where "The stipulation would be that you cannot work,"⁸ presupposes a reconversion of subjectivity and work on the self, because laziness represents a different way of inhabiting time and the world.

"In any case, I'm sure there wouldn't be as many residents as one might imagine" since, "in fact, it really isn't easy to be truly lazy and do nothing."⁹ Despite living an extremely austere existence in circumstances at times dire, Duchamp was able to get by without working because he benefited from small advances on a family inheritance, the occasional assistance of rich bourgeois collectors, small transactions in artwork, and other arrangements, none of which, however, could be regularly depended upon. Duchamp was therefore quite aware of the impossibility of leading a "lazy" life without a radical transformation of society.

God knows there's enough food for everybody on earth, without having to work for it. [...] And don't ask me who will make the bread or anything, because there is enough vitality in man in general that he cannot stay lazy. There would be very few lazies in my home, because they couldn't stand to be lazy too long. In such a society barter would not exist, and the great people would be the garbage collectors. It would be the highest and noblest form of activity. [...] I am afraid it's a bit like communism,

but it is not. I am seriously and very much from a capitalist country.¹⁰

Art is just as much a part of the social division of labor as any other activity. From this point of view, being an artist is a profession or a specialization like any other. It is precisely the requirement that one occupy a place, a role, and an identity with one's body and soul that was the object of Duchamp's permanent, categorical refusal. In the artist's case, however, only the techniques of subordination were different since, from early on, they were no longer solely disciplinary in nature. Now the techniques of Control Societies in general are as much if not more "chronophagic" than disciplinary just as in artistic activity.

"There is no time to make very fine work. The pace of production is such that it becomes another kind of race," part of society's generalized rat race.¹¹ Artworks "have to be slowly produced. I don't believe in [the] speed in artistic production" introduced by capitalism.¹² Teeny Duchamp, his second wife, recounts that "he didn't work like a laborer" but alternated between short periods of work and long breaks: "I couldn't work more than two hours a day [...]. Even today I can't work more than two hours a day. It's really something to work every day."¹³

More generally, the refusal of "artistic" work means refusing to produce for the market and collectors in order to meet the aesthetic demands of an ever-expanding public.

It means refusing to submit to their standards of evaluation and their demand for “quantity” and “quality.”

The danger is falling into the capitalist ranks, of making a comfortable living in a genre of painting one recopies till the end of one's days.¹⁴

Duchamp very precisely and trenchantly describes the artist's integration into the capitalist economy and the transformation of art into a commodity: “you buy art the way you buy spaghetti.”

In 1963 William Seitz asked Duchamp if he thought the artist had compromised himself under capitalism. “It's a capitulation. It seems today that the artist couldn't survive if he didn't swear allegiance to the good old mighty dollar. That shows how far the integration has gone.”¹⁵

Integration into capitalism is also and above all subjective. Even if the artist, unlike the factory work, has no direct boss, he is nonetheless subject to apparatuses of power which do more than merely define the space in which he produces; they determine the composition of subjectivity. In the 1980s the artist became the model of “human capital” because he embodied the “freedom” to create.

Courbet was the first to say “accept my art or don't accept it. I'm free.” This was in 1860. Since then every artist has had the feeling that he must be still freer than the last. The Pointillists freer than the

Impressionists, the Cubists freer still, and the Futurists and Dadaists, and so forth. Freer, freer, and more free—they call that freedom. Why should the artist's ego be allowed to drain and poison the atmosphere?¹⁶

Once liberated from the orders of the king or lord, the artist considers himself free whereas he merely goes from one form of subordination to another. The artist, like the factory worker, is deprived of his “know-how” as production becomes standardized; he loses all singularity, even in painting.

Since the creation of a market in painting, everything in the art world has changed dramatically. Look at how they produce. Do you honestly believe they like it, that they enjoy painting fifty times, a hundred times, the same thing? Not a bit. They don't make paintings, they make paychecks.¹⁷

Duchamp affirmed his refusal unequivocally: “I refuse to be an artist in the way it's meant today”; “I wanted to completely transform attitudes toward the artist”; “I've really tried to kill the little god the artist has become over the last century”; “You know, I never wanted to be an artist,” etc.

The refusal of “artistic” work is not a simple opposition. It is not the negation of a pair of interdependent

terms (art/non-art) opposed by the very fact of their resemblance.

Duchamp is crystal clear on this point: his refusal eschews the Dadaist position which,

in its opposition, became the other face of that which it opposed [...]. Literary Dada, a purely negative and accusatory phenomenon, gave too much credit to what we were determined to avoid. An example, if you want: with *3 Standard Stoppages* I was looking to give a different idea of the unity of length. I could have taken a measure of wood and broken it at a given point—that would have been Dada.¹⁸

Refusal opens to radical heterogeneity. Nothing is further from capitalist work than lazy action, whose actualization of political-existential potential subverts art as well as art's negation.

I'm against the word "anti-," because it's a bit like "atheist" compared to "believer." An atheist is more or less as religious as a believer and an anti-artist more or less as artistic as an "artist." [...] "Anartist" would be a lot better, if I could change the term, than "anti-artist."¹⁹

While Duchamp rejected the injunction to be an artist (from 1923 he referred to himself as one "defrocked"

from art), he still never abandoned artistic practices, protocols, and procedures. The “anartist” demands that artistic functions and procedures be reconfigured. Such a delicate position locates the refusal of artistic work neither inside nor outside the institution of art but at its limit, its frontiers, and from this limit and these frontiers the refusal serves to remove the dialectical opposition between art and anti-art.

2. *Coffee Mill*: Between an Aesthetics of (Futurist) Movement and a Static (Cubist) Aesthetics

Let us now try to understand how lazy action and non-movement allow us to rethink action, time, and subjectivity.

Duchamp declared on numerous occasions the importance of the small *Coffee Mill* painted in 1911 (“You’ve said that the *Coffee Mill* is the key to all the rest of your work.” Duchamp: “Yes [...]. It happened at the end of 1911”²⁰). It permitted him very early on to leave the avant-gardes to which, in any case, he had never really belonged. Like many of his contemporaries, Duchamp was fascinated by movement and speed, the symbols of a roaring modernity.

Nude Descending a Staircase was meant to represent movement by drawing on Etienne Jules Marey’s chronocinematographic techniques, and yet it represented movement only indirectly. With *Coffee Mill* Duchamp found a way past the opposition between movement—the Futurist’s modernist celebration of movement—and the

static aesthetics of the Cubists (“They were proud to be static, too. They kept showing things from different facets, but that was not movement”²¹) through his discovery of a different dimension to movement and time.

Breaking up the coffee mill into its component parts, he introduced, in what art historians consider the first “machinist” canvas, the first diagrammatic sign in the history of painting: the arrow indicating the movement of the mechanism. “I did a description of the mechanism. You see the cogwheel, and you see the turning handle at the top, I also used the arrow showing the direction in which the hand turned [...]. It’s not one moment; it’s all the possibilities of the grinding machine. It’s not like a drawing.”²² With this small painting Duchamp took a first step toward discovering not speed but possibility, not movement but becoming, not chronological time but the time of the event.

The possible, becoming, and the event open to “regions governed by neither time nor space,” moving at different speeds (infinite speeds, Guattari would say) or at the greatest speed and the greatest slowness (Deleuze).

What philosophy, thanks to Bergson, was in the process of theorizing—the reversal of the subordination of time to movement—Duchamp discovered in creating this painting. Yet he added a fundamental condition until then neglected by philosophers: laziness as another way of experiencing time and lazy action as a new way of exploring the present as duration, possibility, and event.²³ For Deleuze, access to this temporality, to the movements that flow

from time, is the privilege of the “seer,” for Duchamp, the privilege of the “lazy.”

Duchamp always remained interested in “movement,” although this new way of conceiving it would be, strictly speaking, unrepresentable. Duchamp described it only in the notes accompanying *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, which in fact constitute an integral part of the work:

At each segment of duration all the future and past segments are reproduced [...]. All these past and future segments coexist, then, in a present that is no longer what one would ordinarily call the present instant but a kind of present of multiple lengths.²⁴

Time is money, says the capitalist, “my capital isn’t money, it’s time,” says Duchamp. And the time in question isn’t the chronological time that can be measured and accumulated, but a present which, encompassing at once the past, the present, and the future, is the focal point of the production of the new. Looking back on the period in an interview in 1959, he proclaimed that “Movement is over, cubism is over.” In his first readymade there was still movement but the turning bicycle wheel “was a movement that pleased me, like fire in a fireplace.”²⁵ Sergei Eisenstein understood the kind of movement involved: “what can be more capable of expressing the dream of a fluid diversity of forms than fire?”²⁶ The attraction to fire lies in its “eternal

changeability, modularity, transformation from one thing to the next and the perpetual development of its images.”²⁷

Fire represents “an idiosyncratic protest against metaphysical inertness established once and for all.”²⁸ “The rejection of the constraint of form, fixed once and for all, freedom from ossification, an ability to take on any form dynamically,” which Eisenstein called “plasmasticity,” perfectly matches Duchamp’s thinking.²⁹

Duchamp described the possibilities he discovered with *Coffee Mill* in another way: “The possible is an inframince.”³⁰ Inframince is the dimension of the molecular, of small perceptions, of infinitesimal differences, of the cointelligence of contraries, where the laws of the macroscopic and, in particular, those of causality, of the logic of non-contradiction, of language and its generalizations, and of chronological time no longer hold. It is in inframince that becoming occurs, in the micro that changes take place. “The possible implies becoming—the passage from one to the other happens in inframince.”³¹

Access to this dimension in every case depends on the same thing: another way of life, as “Lazy Inhabitants of the inframince.”

The Readymade Is a Lazy Technique

The readymade is a lazy technique because it involves no virtuosity, no special know-how, no productive activity, and no manual labor. *Fountain*, *Bottle Rack*, or the snow

shovel—Duchamp simply picked them off “the shelf of the lazyman’s hardware store”³² where serial production and mass consumption had placed them.

With *Coffee Mill* Duchamp began to free himself from the creative subjectivity of the artist and the artist’s techniques, employing industrial drawing to produce mechanomorphic works that bring together the traditional expertise of the artisan and the hypermodernity of machines. Made by a machine, the readymade “added to the impersonality.”³³

The readymade continues to surprise precisely because it continues to challenge our present actuality.

The simplest definition that Duchamp gave of the readymade is that it is “a work with no artist required to make it.” It is above all an “act of defiance [...] an undeification” of the artist which lowers his “status in society instead of elevating him, of making him something sacred.”³⁴

There is no artist to express interiority, no creation to speak of, and the traditional role of the viewer is revoked: “the idea of contemplation completely disappears.”³⁵

Unlike modern-day capitalism, which requires creation everywhere only in order to stifle it, Duchamp mistrusted the concept of creation. The readymade flouts the celebration of artistic genius.

I shy away from the word “creation.” In the ordinary, social meaning of the word—well, it’s very nice but, fundamentally, I don’t believe in the creative function of the artist.³⁶

Artistic Activity Is an Activity Like Any Other

The art market makes the act of creation the specificity of artistic production. Its value is determined by scarcity, by the uniqueness and originality of the creator.

Readymades were a way to shake off the artwork's monetization, which was only just beginning. Only in the art world does the original work get sold then instantly acquire a kind of aura. But with my readymades a replica does the job just as well.³⁷

With the readymade Duchamp wanted to "throw out the idea of the original" (and by the same token the idea of the copy), because "there is nothing unique [...], in fact, nearly all the readymades that exist today are not originals in any normal sense of the word." And yet even if there is nothing unique about them, even if they are not produced by the hands and virtuosity of the artist, it is no less imperative that they be signed, a fact which, as we shall see, threatens to sneak through the back door what had been thrown out the front.

The Readymade Is a Technique of the Mind

The readymade does not only, or not primarily, mark the passage from the prosaic world of the commodity into the enchanted world of art, or the porosity between art and non-

art. Nor does it represent a simple blending (or collision) of heterogeneous elements, as today's art critics usually maintain.

Duchamp's techniques constituted the procedures by which he was able to overthrow established values—including and especially aesthetic values—in order to achieve a “transvaluation of all values” (Nietzsche).

The readymade is neither an object nor an image: you have to “look while turning your head away.” It isn't necessary to see, you need only know that an operation, a gesture, has been carried out. The readymade doesn't appeal to or flatter the eyes; instead it forces us to think, to think differently, by orienting the mind differently. From this perspective it is possible to define the readymade as a technique of the mind, a technique of both desubjectivation and new subjectivation.

The readymade is not produced, it is chosen. And the choice occurs not only by suspending the role of the artist and the product attributed to him, but also by neutralizing aesthetic taste. For taste is a habit acquired through repetition; good taste, no different from bad, represents pre-established ways of judging, feeling, and seeing, which are no more and no less than prejudices and clichés. In order to choose the readymade a certain “freedom of indifference” must be achieved, that is, the suspension of all social habits, norms, and significations.

The interesting thing for me was to extract [the object] from its practical or utilitarian context and

bring it into one that was completely empty, if you want, empty of everything, empty of everything to such an extent that I spoke of complete anesthesia.³⁸

For new meaning to emerge, for something new to occur, this emptiness, which liberates possibility, must be traversed. It is at this empty point, at this nonsensical point, that we no longer see the same things, that we no longer hear the same things.

On the one hand, this choice depends on the artist's subjectivity, on the other, it completely neutralizes it. The artist does indeed make the aesthetic decision to limit himself to choosing an object rather than painting, rather than making something with his hands. But through his choice a space opens in which the "rationality" and conscious control of the subject and the mind governing what he does are interrupted. He lets himself go: lazy, he settles into an "empty" temporality, an "empty" duration, in which it is no longer the artist who chooses.

"How do you choose a readymade?" someone once asked Duchamp: "It chooses you, so to speak."

The readymade follows from a deliberate choice that opens a new dimension where there is no longer any choice but where something happens, something takes place. The readymade is a meeting, an encounter ("what matters is the date, in other words, the day and time"), the trace of an event.

Against Language

Duchamp had no confidence in language, “language is one of humanity’s errors.” To achieve emptiness, total anesthesia, the condition for creating new sets of possibilities, the significations language conveys must be suspended, significations which like good or bad taste are no more than habits crystallized by repetition.

“From 1913 on, Duchamp’s subversive fervor [was] directed against language.” Thus begins Michel Sanouillet’s introduction to Duchamp’s *Essential Writings*.³⁹

The anartist distrusts language’s power to force conformity, because “instead of expressing subconscious phenomena, [language] in reality creates thought by and after the word”⁴⁰ by abstracting and thereby erasing all difference, preventing us from accessing the molecular space in which becoming occurs and in which change happens.

“It would be better,” Duchamp says, “to try / to go / into the infra mince / interval which separates / 2 ‘identicals’ than / to conveniently accept / the verbal generalization / which makes / 2 twins look like / 2 drops of water.”⁴¹

All readymades are accompanied by puns whose purpose is to orient thought differently by taking us out of language, grammar, and syntax, which, more than linguistic markers, are the marks of power. Even with words Duchamp employs the readymade technique, taking them out of the sphere of communication in order to put them to work in a completely different context.

Puns are not the games of a mediocre mind. Duchamp found in them “a source of stimulation both because of their actual sound and because of unexpected meanings attached to the interrelationships of disparate words [...]. Sometimes four or five different levels of meaning come through. If you introduce a familiar word into an alien atmosphere, you have something comparable to distortion in painting, something surprising and new.”⁴²

Duchamp did not understand signs in terms of Saussure’s opposition between signifier and signified. First, signs are power signs: they force us to think in a different way or, like the arrow Duchamp inserted into his *Coffee Mill*, they represent nothing and are instead a “schema, the diagram of movement.”⁴³ “The arrow was an innovation that pleased me a lot—the diagrammatic aspect was interesting from an aesthetic point of view.”⁴⁴ He comes back to this idea elsewhere: “After all, a painting is the diagram of an idea.”

The diagrammatic signs of great scientific, economic, and monetary machines do not refer to an already constituted reality but instead simulate and pre-produce a reality that does not yet exist, one that only exists virtually. Existence, rather than being given in advance and in turn represented, is precisely what is at stake in artistic-experimental and theoretical-political-experimental assemblages in other domains.

Second, “the tyranny of representation” Duchamp mentions in an interview concerns art as much as language. With the readymade he left representation behind. He confined himself to reality itself—an industrial

commodity, a urinal, a bottle rack—just as the cinema had begun to do some years earlier, a technique that required a new semiotics, a “semiotics of reality,” as Pier Paolo Pasolini would say. With the readymade there is, strictly speaking, no representation, only “presentation.”

Rose Sélavy

Unlike the labor movement’s refusal of work, Duchamp’s had neither as a basis nor as a result a subjectivation founded on the anthropology and ethics of work.

The widened scope of his refusal subverts all social identities, including sexual ones, by opening to new becomings and subjective experimentations.

In 1920 I decided that it wasn’t enough for me to be a single individual. I wanted to change my name, for the readymades above all, in order to make myself another personality—you see, to change names, simply.⁴⁵

Having hesitated about a Jewish name, he faithfully applied the techniques he had previously used in order to simultaneously choose the name of a new “sexual” becoming.

Rose Sélavy was born in 1920 in New York. A Jewish name? A sex change—Rose, the “ugliest” name, to my personal taste, and Sélavy, an easy play on words. *C’est la vie*.⁴⁶

Duchamp always put his faith in lazy action because it functioned as a technique of disidentification. Introducing laziness into a world founded on activity undermines social and sexual identities.

In antiquity, activity (sexual, political, and productive) was identified with men. Women, on the other hand, were inactivity and passivity incarnate. Greek democracy celebrated political action as a domain reserved exclusively for men. The democratization of slavery established under capitalism (waged labor being the worst kind of slavery) no longer prioritized political action but rather production. Nonetheless, producers were still and remain men and work a sign of virility.

The distinction between (masculine) activity and (feminine) inactivity could be found in the new sciences like psychoanalysis emerging at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. For Freud activity is represented by daddy's dick and if you don't have one things get tricky, because now with activity castrated you are quite naturally missing something.

Duchamp's move to the United States gave him the chance to completely undo his identity ("I'd almost like to free myself from myself"), and not only his identity as an artist. "I was quite happy to be rootless, because what I feared was the influence of roots on me. I wanted to be rid of them."

Lazy action is an operation of declassifying, of eluding subjugations, among which the identification with a profession.

“You refuse to be called a painter, just as you refuse to be called a writer [...]. So what is your profession?” Duchamp’s response: “Why is it so essential to classify people? What am I? Do I even know? A human, quite simply, a ‘breather’ [...]”⁴⁷

3. Two Types of Production

The concept of production also lends itself to two readings. First, it denotes capitalist production, and second, a production of subjectivity founded on the refusal of capitalist production. Let us begin with economics: “An artwork in itself doesn’t exist. It is the viewers who make the painting.”⁴⁸ Duchamp articulates here and elsewhere a theory of value according to which value as such doesn’t exist: it is the relationship that creates value.

The artist may very well like to believe in “the intrinsic value of his work. I don’t believe in that at all. I honestly believe that a painting is made as much by the viewer as the artist.”⁴⁹

The value of an artwork does not come from the labor that goes into it or from its utility. Duchamp replaces a substantialist theory of value with a relational theory which, in many respects, largely anticipates how today’s economy, dominated by finance, works.

On the one hand, value is determined in the relationship between the artist and the public. The artwork is a co-production, a product with two poles: “the onlooker and

the maker, and the spark that comes from that bipolar action gives birth to something—like electricity.”⁵⁰ As the present or future “onlooker,” the public brings the work into the “real” and confers on it its “social value.” The artist is not alone in accomplishing an act of creation, for the viewer ensures contact with the outside world by decoding and interpreting the work and in doing so contributes to the creative process. Jacques Rancière could present his emancipated spectator, who “observes, selects, compares, interprets,”⁵¹ as something novel only because he completely ignored Duchamp.

“I give the person who views [the work] as much importance as the person who creates” and perhaps the public still more importance since in this relationship the latter not only brings its judgment to bear but also and above all its money.

On the other hand, the public is in turn the product of cultural authorities (art critics, museum directors, the press, curators, etc.) and of the culture industry especially, which manages the whole elite milieu. “It’s not the artists who decide, it’s the ‘authorities’; by this I mean the viewers of the period, the connoisseurs, the superior minds of the era, who are just as important as the man who makes [the work].”⁵²

Money of course plays the leading role here, for its part in the “maker/viewer” relationship accounts for the relationship’s radical transformation. Ruled by “speculation,” the relationship quickly became overdetermined. Indeed,

the art market offered very early on a glimpse of the link the “real” economy would have with “financialization.”⁵³

It was just after the First World War. A definite form of people thinking of buying for speculation.

Duchamp shifted the evaluation process to the public and art authorities, yet it is in fact “speculation” that operated as the evaluation of evaluations—exactly as finance does today. The most abstract evaluation processes apply to relations of “production” and determine the forms they take (quantity, speed, accelerated reproduction, etc.).

You can make a thing in ten minutes that’s worth so much! Then comes the temptation—for buyer and artist alike—to use that thing to satisfy the need for speculation which has, little by little, developed, because it’s a form of competition.⁵⁴

Duchamp calls “speculators” parasites, crooks, and racketeers because they don’t play a direct part in production. In reality, they are internal to the relationship and even constitute a viewer, that is, an individual, entirely specific evaluator who wields enormous power in the determination of value.

In Mike Wallace’s interview in 1961, the host was shocked by Duchamp’s ruthless portrait of modern art. He explained,

[By] racketeering I mean making money under false pretense. In other words, the painting you buy [for] 10 cents today may be worth 3 cents in twenty years. In other words, there is no actual final value attached to that painting, because the aesthetic value changes in money value. So there is racketeering when you profit [from] the moment, when you can make money with painting by making many paintings and much money.⁵⁵

Speculation introduces the infinite of capitalist valorization into the world of art (money that produces money just as in any other capitalist activity). Duchamp was perfectly aware of the dynamics and the crisis this implied.

I believe the prices [...] are disturbing. If money grows, it must continue to grow. Can a numerical thing grow indefinitely? [...] If it doesn't grow, there will be what's called a crash, a sudden collapse due to a political disaster or something else.⁵⁶

The Capitalism of Consumption

The problematic entry of the readymade onto the art market also tells us a great deal about the nature of today's economy.

I never intended to sell my readymades. So it really was a gesture to show that one could do something

without having, in the back of your head, the idea of making money through it.⁵⁷

When in the 1960s, Arturo Schwarz, a gallery owner and artist from Milan, wanted to put readymades on the market he accomplished, with the artist's assent, the three things Duchamp had previously refused: repetition (he reproduced eight copies of *Fountain* and other readymades), monetization (he gave them monetary value), and aestheticization (he made them works of art).

Duchamp was well aware of the contradiction, he even spoke of "absolute contradiction, but that's what's appealing," and justified his decision in an interview with the BBC. Asked if "you yourself, in designating certain objects and signing them with your own name, have created a highly commercial object," he replied, "you have to sign them. They [the readymades] are signed and numbered."⁵⁸ Finally, he recognized that, "in spite of himself," he had contributed to something called art. At the same time, under pressure from the avant-gardes of the 1960s, who in their rediscovery of his work had brought him new acclaim, he also contributed to something called the art market.

I'm sorry about it. But at the same time if I hadn't done it, I would have completely been not even noticed [...]. You're right, there are probably a hundred people like that who have given up art and condemned it, and proved to themselves that it wasn't

necessary, like religion, and so forth. And who cares for them? Nobody.⁵⁹

Duchamp was conscious of the inevitable commercial opportunity aestheticization provided. New Realism, Pop Art, and Assemblage were an

easy way out, and live on what Dada did. When I discovered readymades I thought to discourage aesthetics. In Neo-Dada they have taken my readymades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty.⁶⁰

Duchamp underscores the singular difficulty of holding the position he chose for himself—to be neither inside nor outside art, but always at its limit. Above all, he reveals the difficulty or the impossibility of maintaining a refusal of work as an individual.

Why did his attempt to avoid the processes of economic integration—limiting the number of copies, signing and numbering them—finally prove ineffective? Because a signature, repetition, and numbering are the conditions placed on the work for its entry on the marketplace. In capitalist society, the signature is the affirmation both of (the producer's) identity and property, as Duchamp, whose father was a notary, well knew.

Originality, property, and the signature, the latter of which guarantees the former, are the prerequisites of modernday production and consumption. When you buy a luxury product (Louis Vuitton, Prada, etc.) or even a mainstream consumer product (Adidas, Nike, iPhone, etc.), you are not paying for the product but for the signature. You are in reality buying the brand (the producer) while the counterfeit—the practical “critique” of the economy—is declared a crime and pursued as an attack on the market and private property.

Duchamp played with the signature, multiplying it in order to erode and undo identity (and authorship). As Thierry Davila writes, Duchamp was

Totor, when he wrote to Henri-Pierre Roché, Roger Maurice or Morice when he wrote to Brancusi, Marcel Dee, Dee (Vorced), (Marcel) Duche, Rrose Marcel, Stone of Air, Duche, Sélavy, Marcel à vie, Rrose, Marcel Rrose, and Marcelavy—Marcel Duchamp in the looking-glass...⁶¹

But on the marketplace the signature must shed its critical, ironic, or comic character and designate as unequivocally as possible property and the brand (under threat of legal sanction).⁶² Whereas, in accordance with the anartist’s desire, “the best work of art one could make” would be silence, for “you couldn’t sign it and everyone would benefit”—a poetic definition of the “communist” right of user.⁶³

Duchamp considered reproduction in limited series legitimate while “multiples, coming to 150, 200 copies [...]—that’s really too crude.” But once the door is opened to serial reproduction, the customized mass-consumer industry takes care of the rest, because it is “a multiple” in all but name (the “infinite” reproduction of the signed original fiercely protected by the laws of intellectual property).

4. Production as a Process of Subjectivation

What must be reproduced isn’t the (readymade) object but the singularity of the subjective experience of anesthesia, of the encounter, of the event, of which the object is only a trace. To refuse and resist the impoverishment and standardization of subjectivity imposed by “work” (and the infinite repetition of excitement/frustration consumption ensures), Duchamp asks us to think of the “creative process” as a process of subjectivation and of the artist as a medium. For the creative process does not exclusively have to do with artistic creation. It is present in all kinds of activity.

Instead of describing the production of the artistic object, Duchamp attempts to “describe the subjective mechanism which produces art.”⁶⁴ That the artwork is good, bad, or indifferent matters little, since the principle and measure of Duchamp’s art are not the “beautiful” but the “tendency to act” for the transformation of subjectivity. Describing what the artist does, he uses an uncommon

metaphor that profoundly redefines the artist's function: "the artist acts like a mediumistic being"⁶⁵ (like a shaman, as Beuys would say, continuing in the same tradition), systematically returning to the point at which subjectivity emerges.

The techniques of the artist-medium are techniques of the mind or techniques of the production of the self which disclose sites of subjectivation and endeavor, from these points of emergence, toward their becoming and construction. The artist-medium thus enters the scene *before* subjectivity is captured in "repetition," before the sites of potential subjective mutations crystallize into habit. To reach this point prior to the subject, to actualize processual, mutant forces, intensities, and temporalities, there must be a kind of "vacancy," a complete anesthesia, which we have already examined above with the readymade. The rupture in ordinary experience then opens to another dimension, to the "labyrinth beyond space and time," that is, to a generative time, to a proliferation of possibilities. This rupture in the ordinary spatio-temporal coordinates of sensible experience does not provide an "original" subjectivity, which one would then need simply to free from subjections or enslavements so that it might flourish. It offers only its point of emergence, opening to a processuality from which its rules, procedures, and techniques issue in an immanent way, those through which subjectivity metamorphoses. The making of the sensible artwork through which this metamorphosis occurs exceeds both the artist

and the viewer. For Duchamp, the artist is thus never “fully conscious” of his activity; there is always a gap between what he has intentionally planned and what he effectively accomplishes. The artist can never control the effects he has on the viewer because the latter, in turn, actively intervenes in the process by deciphering and interpreting the artist’s activity and that which the artist produces. The transfer of subjectivation between artist and spectator effects “osmosis,” “transubstantiation,” “transmutation,” terms which denote the passage from one substance into another and, for Duchamp, the passage from one mode of subjectivation to another. By connecting us with forces that surpass us, the artist-medium doesn’t produce an object but rather a series of relations, intensities, and affects that constitute so many vectors of subjectivation. More than the object or the artwork, what interests Duchamp are the “incorporeal” transformations performed by the creative process (the transubstantiation of the inert material employed) which affect at once the artist’s subjectivity and the public’s. The creative process is an aesthetic act insofar as it shifts and reconfigures the field of possible experience and establishes a mechanism for creating a new sensible and new “gray matter.”

What Duchamp identifies here are also the conditions and effects constituting a political rupture, a demobilization that suspends established power relations and opens a space for a process constructive of new subjectivity. The starting point for this is always a refusal, a break.

Contemporary art, on the other hand, which refuses neither artistic nor wage labor, becomes an easy prey to capital. It has even become one of capital's essential resources for aestheticizing consumption and power relations.

Reproduction, monetization, and aestheticization, which the anartist had futilely tried to contain, were finally adopted and fully exploited in Warhol's work. The latter represents the artist's total "capitulation." For instead of a refusal, Warhol always rigorously adhered to the values and logic of the market, money, and consumption: "Business art is the step that comes after Art. [...] During the hippie era people put down the idea of business—they'd say, 'Money is bad,' and 'Working is bad,' but making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art."⁶⁶

This staging of the "absolute commodity," as Baudrillard terms it, is absolutely indistinguishable from a power which the artist himself represents as absolute—where there is no room for the second Duchampian concept of "production."

If the artist becomes indistinguishable from the businessman or celebrity, if Warhol's Factory functions exactly like a modern-day corporation, the conditions no longer exist for conceiving of art as a "technique of the mind," a means of subjectivation, a technique of the self, or even a system of signs obliging us to think and to feel. Nor is it possible to conceive of the artist's role as that of a "medium" of subjectivation.

Art critics have relegated Duchamp's lifestyle to a kind of dandyism. In reality, his is much closer to that of the cynic philosophers, especially considering his presence in the public sphere (iconoclastic provocation, shock, eroticism—which was highly important⁶⁷—puns, humor, etc.). Warhol, on the other hand, epitomizes the cynic in the modern sense of the word.

Duchamp was among the first to understand that in Control Societies, whose structures began to appear in art well before they did elsewhere, art as an institution, art “in the social sense of the word,” as Duchamp defined it, offers no promise of emancipation, but instead represents a new technique for governing subjectivity (art is “a habit-forming drug. [...] It's a sedative drug”⁶⁸). Only refusal is capable of opening the possibility not of greater public access to art or the public's “democratic” acculturation, but of constituting and enhancing one's ability to act on the real. This is what so terribly lacks in the present age.

The shock will come from something entirely different, from non-art, anart [...], no art at all. And yet something will be produced because, after all, the word ‘art,’ etymologically, means “to do,” not even “to make,” but “to do.” And the minute you do something, you are an artist. [...] But you are not so, you do not sell your work, but you do the action, in other words, art means action, activity of any kind. Anyone. Everyone. But we, in our society, [have] decided to

make a group to be called “artists,” a group to be called “doctors,” and so forth, which is purely artificial. [...] Instead of being singularized in a little box like that, with so many artists in so many square feet, [art] will be universal, it will be a human factor in anyone’s life, to be an artist but not noticed as an artist.⁶⁹

The consequences of capitalism, whose sole aim is to produce ever more money, are more than merely economic. Capitalism endows us with a specific perception and sensibility, for to perceive and to feel are functions of doing. Lazy action is at the antipodes of capitalism, in which the ends (money) are everything and process nothing. The process literally wouldn’t exist if it didn’t make money. Laziness, on the other hand, is completely concentrated in process, on the becoming of subjectivity and its ability to act.

mode: the active state and not the / result—the active state giving / no interest to the result [...]

“mode: experiments.—the result not / to be kept—
not presenting any / interest⁷⁰

Duchamp didn’t sacrifice his life to art. On the contrary, it was his ability to act, his conduct and ethos that were of foremost importance. Art is one of the possible techniques for enlarging and empowering one’s capacity to act, but it isn’t the only one.

The important thing is to experience and to have a certain conduct. This conduct has determined the paintings I've painted, the puns I've made, and everything I've done, publically, in any case.⁷¹

Lazy action is incomparably "richer" than capitalist activity, for it contains possibilities that are not based on economic production (on surplus value) but open to an indefinite becoming which must be constructed, invented, and cultivated. Lazy action does not derive from aesthetics; it is part of an existentialist pragmatics. Duchamp demonstrates that in order to act differently one must live differently and that in capitalism to do so doesn't depend on work but on its refusal, one which belongs to a different kind of ethics and a different "anthropology."

Can the refusal of modern-day work draw on lazy action in order to develop its political potential? Without a doubt, because, as Lafargue might have said, a "strange madness"—one still stranger than in his time—has spread the globe: the dominated are no longer clamoring for more work but rather, quite simply, a job.

"For you, creating has never been about work: it has always been..." "An obstacle. I find that working in order to live is idiotic. But that's another story."⁷²

It is our story, because idiocy still rules the world.

NOTES

1. Bernard Marcadé, *Marcel Duchamp. La vie à crédit* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007), 490. All in-text citations in which the name of the author is not given are of Marcel Duchamp. Notes indicate sources in which the citations appear. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are those of the translator.

2. The refusal of work is not a *désœuvrement* as Agamben understands the term. For him, *désœuvrement*—inoperativeness or un-working—belongs to “human nature,” whereas the refusal of work is part of the (political) struggle against capitalist assignments to specific roles and functions. “Doing nothing,” as Jacques Rancière argues in an admirable text on Stendhal (*Aisthesis*, trans. Zakir Paul [New York: Verso, 2013]), is an effect of the French Revolution; it is the other face of revolutionary “action.” According to Rancière, art must confront this new “plebian principle,” which establishes a possible genealogy of Duchampian laziness.

3. Calvin Tomkins, *The Afternoon Interviews* (Brooklyn: Badlands Unlimited, 2013), 87.

4. Bernard Marcadé, *Laisser pisser les mérinos: la paresse de Marcel Duchamp* (Paris: L'Echoppe, 2006), 47.

5. Tomkins, op. cit., 87.

6. Ibid., 4.

7. Marcadé, *Marcel Duchamp*, op. cit., 456.

8. Tomkins, op. cit., 87.
9. Marcadé, *Laisser pisser les mérinos*, op. cit. 48.
10. Tomkins, op. cit., 87–88.
11. Ibid., 25.
12. Ibid., 26.
13. Ibid., 76.
14. Otto Hahn, “Entretien: Marcel Duchamp,” *Express*, no. 684 (23 July 1964): 22–23.
15. William Seitz, “What’s Happened to Art?” *Vogue* (February 15, 1963): 130.
16. Francis Steegmuller, “Duchamp, Fifty Years Later,” *Show* (February 1963): 28–29.
17. Denis de Rougement, “Marcel Mine de Rien,” *Etant donné Marcel Duchamp*, no. 3 (2001 [1945]): 143.
18. Marcel Duchamp, *Duchamp du signe*, ed. Michel Sanouillet (Paris: Flammarion, 1999), 227.
19. Richard Hamilton, *Le Grand Déchiffreur* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2009).
20. Tomkins, op. cit., 25.
21. Ibid., 72.
22. Ibid., 48.
23. “The event occurs as a rupture in space and time coordinates. And Marcel Duchamp pushes the point of accommodation in order to show that there is always behind these relationships of temporal discursivity a possible index of the event on the verge of crystallization beyond time, which traverses time, transversal to all measures of time.” Félix Guattari and Olivier Zahm (interview), “Félix Guattari et l’art contemporain,” *Chimères*, no. 23 (summer 1994).
24. *Duchamp du signe*, op. cit., 135.

25. Hamilton, op. cit., 122.

26. Sergei Eisenstein, *Disney*, trans. Dustin Condren (San Francisco: Potemkin Press, 2013), 17.

27. Ibid., 44.

28. Ibid., 28.

29. Ibid., 15.

30. *Duchamp du signe*, op. cit., 290. Note that the mince in Duchamp's concept of "inframince" means "thin" in French, thus, literally, *infrathin*. Translator's note.

31. Ibid., 279.

32. Ibid., 391.

33. "Yes, they call it the machine age, don't they? I mean, everything is becoming mechanized in this life. All this creates a climate for my being attracted to expressing myself in the form of mechanographic, if you want to say, instead of using the old-fashioned approach of the painting. I was interested in using a mechanistic approach, if I wanted to step out of tradition." Tomkins, op. cit., 48, 55.

34. Hamilton, op. cit., 122.

35. Philippe Collin (interview), *Marcel Duchamp parle des ready-made à Philippe Collin* (Paris: L'Echoppe, 1998).

36. Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (New York: Da Capo Press, 1987), 16.

37. Jane Bakewell, "Marcel Duchamp interviewed by Joan Bakewell," *The Late Show Line Up*, BBC UK Television (June 5, 1968).

38. Jean Neyens, "Will Go Underground," interview on Radio Télévision Belge Francophone (1965), transcript, trans. Sarah Skinner Kilborne, *tout-fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal 4* (2002): <http://www.toutfait.com/>.

39. "Introduction," *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 5.

40. Marcel Duchamp, *The Portable Museum*, ed. Ecke Bonk, trans. David Britt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 252.
41. Marcel Duchamp, *Marcel Duchamp, Notes*, ed. and trans. Paul Matisse (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), note 35.
42. Katharine Kuh, "Marcel Duchamp," *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Modern Artists* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), 89.
43. Georges Charbonnier (interview), *Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp* (Marseille: A Dimanche, 1994), 59.
44. Cabanne, op. cit., 31. Francis Bacon underscored the relationship between Duchamp's twofold discovery of the diagrammatic and the possible in *Coffee Mill*: "The marks are made and you survey the thing like you would a sort of graph. And you see within this graph the possibilities of all types of fact being planted." Quoted in David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), 56.
45. Guy Viau, "To Change Names, Simply," interview on Canadian Radio Television (July 17, 1960), transcript, trans. Sarah Skinner Kilborne, *tout-fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal* 4 (2002): <http://www.toutfait.com/>.
46. Cabanne, op. cit., 64.
47. Michel Sanouillet (interview), "Dans l'atelier de Marcel Duchamp," *Les Nouvelles littéraires* (December 16, 1964): 5.
48. Jean Schuster, "Marcel Duchamp, vite," *Le Surréalisme, même*, no. 2 (Spring 1957), 17.
49. Charbonnier, op. cit., 73.
50. Tomkins, op. cit., 31.
51. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliot (New York: Verso, 2009), 13.
52. Charbonnier, op. cit., 83–84.
53. Tomkins, op. cit., 34.
54. Charbonnier, op. cit., 92.

55. Mike Wallace (interview), "On the Hot Seat: Mike Wallace Interviews Marcel Duchamp," *Art History* 23:1 (March 2000): 44.
56. Charbonnier, op. cit., 88.
57. Tomkins, op. cit., 26.
58. Joan Bakewell, op. cit.
59. Ibid.
60. Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 207–208.
61. Thierry Davila, *De l'inframince: Brève histoire de l'imperceptible, de Marcel Duchamp à nos jours* (Paris: Editions du Regard, 2010), 57.
62. "I promised in writing to stop signing readymades in order to protect his edition," wrote Duchamp, speaking of the edition Schwarz to the American Painter Douglas Gorsline. The latter had asked Duchamp to sign copies of other readymades, which he had readily done prior to his contract with the Italian gallerist. Marcadé, *Marcel Duchamp*, op. cit., 482.
63. Ibid.
64. Duchamp, *The Essential Writings*, op. cit., 138.
65. Ibid., 139.
66. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (New York: Harvest, 1977), 92.
67. "I wanted to grasp things with the mind in the way the penis is grasped by the vagina."
68. Tompkins, op. cit., 55–56.
69. "Marcel Duchamp interviewed by Joan Bakewell," op. cit.
70. Duchamp, *Marcel Duchamp, Notes*, note 26.
71. Ibid.
72. Marcadé, *Marcel Duchamp*, op. cit., 285.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maurizio Lazzarato is a sociologist and philosopher living and working in Paris, where he studies immaterial labor, the breakdown of the wage system, and “post-socialist” movements. He is the author of *The Making of the Indebted Man* and *Signs and Machines*, published by Semiotext(e).