

The Creative Act

Let us consider two important factors, the two poles of the creation of art: the artist on one hand, and on the other the spectator who later becomes the posterity.

To all appearances, the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing.

If we give the attributes of a medium to the artist, we must then deny him the state of consciousness on the esthetic plane about what he is doing or why he is doing it. All his decisions in the artistic execution of the work rest with pure intuition and cannot be translated into a self-analysis, spoken or written, or even thought out.

T. S. Eliot, in his essay on "Tradition and the Individual Talent," writes: "The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material."

Millions of artists create; only a few thousands are discussed or accepted by the spectator and many less again are consecrated by posterity.

In the last analysis, the artist may shout from all the rooftops that he is a genius; he will have to wait for the verdict of the spectator in order that his declarations take a social value and that, finally, posterity includes him in the primers of Art History.

Text of a talk given by Duchamp in Houston at the meeting of the American Federation of the Arts, April 1957. Duchamp, who labeled himself a "mere artist," participated in a roundtable with William C. Seitz of Princeton University, Rudolf Arnheim of Sarah Lawrence College, and Gregory Bateson. Reprinted from *ARTnews*, Vol. 56, no. 4 (Summer 1957). The French translation, done by Duchamp himself, appeared in *MDS*.

I know that this statement will not meet with the approval of many artists who refuse this mediumistic role and insist on the validity of their awareness in the creative act—yet, art history has consistently decided upon the virtues of a work of art through considerations completely divorced from the rationalized explanations of the artist.

If the artist, as a human being, full of the best intentions toward himself and the whole world, plays no role at all in the judgment of his own work, how can one describe the phenomenon which prompts the spectator to react critically to the work of art? In other words how does this reaction come about?

This phenomenon is comparable to a transference from the artist to the spectator in the form of an esthetic osmosis taking place through the inert matter, such as pigment, piano or marble.

But before we go further, I want to clarify our understanding of the word "art"—to be sure, without an attempt to a definition.

What I have in mind is that art may be bad, good or indifferent, but, whatever adjective is used, we must call it art, and bad art is still art in the same way as a bad emotion is still an emotion.

Therefore, when I refer to "art coefficient," it will be understood that I refer not only to great art, but I am trying to describe the subjective mechanism which produces art in a raw state—à l'état brut—bad, good or indifferent.

In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward the realization is a series of efforts, pains, satisfactions, refusals, decisions, which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least on the esthetic plane.

The result of this struggle is a difference between the intention and its realization, a difference which the artist is not aware of.

Consequently, in the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap which represents the inability of the artist to express fully his intention; this difference between what he intended to realize and did realize, is the personal "art coefficient" contained in the work.

In other words, the personal "art coefficient" is like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.

To avoid a misunderstanding, we must remember that this "art coefficient" is a personal expression of art "à l'état brut," that is, still in a raw state, which must be "refined" as pure sugar from molasses, by the spectator; the digit of this coefficient has no bearing whatsoever on his verdict. The creative act takes another aspect when the spectator experiences the phenomenon of transmutation; through the change from

inert matter into a work of art, an actual transubstantiation has taken place, and the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the esthetic scale.

All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives its final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists.



Fountain, 1917

Apropos of "Readymades"

IN 1913 I HAD THE HAPPY IDEA TO FASTEN A BICYCLE WHEEL TO A KITCHEN STOOL AND WATCH IT TURN.

A FEW MONTHS LATER I BOUGHT A CHEAP REPRODUCTION OF A WINTER EVENING LANDSCAPE, WHICH I CALLED "PHARMACY" AFTER ADDING TWO SMALL DOTS, ONE RED AND ONE YELLOW, IN THE HORIZON.

IN NEW YORK IN 1915 I BOUGHT AT A HARDWARE STORE A SNOW SHOVEL ON WHICH I WROTE "IN ADVANCE OF THE BROKEN ARM."

IT WAS AROUND THAT TIME THAT THE WORD "READYMADE" CAME TO MIND TO DESIGNATE THIS FORM OF MANIFESTATION.

A POINT WHICH I WANT VERY MUCH TO ESTABLISH IS THAT THE CHOICE OF THESE "READYMADES" WAS NEVER DICTATED BY ESTHETIC DELECTATION.

THIS CHOICE WAS BASED ON A REACTION OF VISUAL INDIFFERENCE WITH AT THE SAME TIME A TOTAL ABSENCE OF GOOD OR BAD TASTE . . . IN FACT A COMPLETE ANESTHESIA.

ONE IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTIC WAS THE SHORT SENTENCE WHICH I OCCASIONALLY INSCRIBED ON THE "READYMADE."

THAT SENTENCE INSTEAD OF DESCRIBING THE OBJECT LIKE A TITLE WAS MEANT TO CARRY THE MIND OF THE SPECTATOR TOWARDS OTHER REGIONS MORE VERBAL.

Talk delivered by Duchamp at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Oct. 19, 1961. Published in *Art and Artists* (London), 1, no. 4. (July 1966), p. 47. The original text is in the Simon Watson Taylor collection.

EDITED BY MICHEL SANOUILLET & ELMER PETERSON

THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS OF
MARCEL DUCHAMP

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MARCEL DUCHAMP

CEL DUCHAMP

CEL DUCHAMP

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Salt Seller

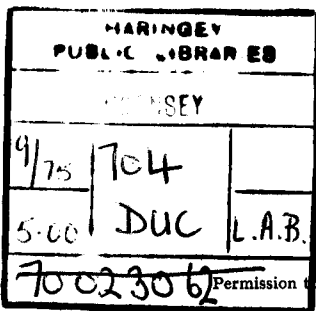
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DUCHAMP'S WRITINGS

It may come as a surprise to some that there is such a thing as "The Writings of Marcel Duchamp." The tendency is to think of him either as a major force in modern art or as a picturesque character who abandoned art for a lifelong game of chess. His writings constitute a relatively unknown side of his creative work.

When *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Green Box)* was published in 1934, André Breton immediately recognized its importance, calling it a major intellectual event. However it was not until 1958, in Michel Sanouillet's *Marchand du Sel* (Paris: Le Terrain Vague), that an attempt was made to collect and publish all of Duchamp's written work.

It has been fifteen years since the publication of *MDS*; Duchamp lived and continued writing for ten of those years, and during that time some of his earlier writing was published, including an important collection of notes, *A l'Infinifit (The White Box)*; New York: Cordier and Ekstrom, 1966). The editors' intent in *Salt Seller*, as we have chosen to translate the Marcel Duchamp/*Marchand du Sel* joke, is to make the original *MDS* material available in English (a revised and updated French *MDS* will be published this year in Paris by Eric Losfeld), as well as to include the rest of Duchamp's signed and published work.

THE BRIDE'S VEIL

Notes relating to his major work, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, make up a significant part of Duchamp's writings. From the summer of 1912 until 1923, the year he left his *Large Glass* "definitively uncompleted," Duchamp worked slowly and deliberately on these notes, which lift the veil of his elusive bride. Calvin Tomkins has written:

The Large Glass stands in relation to painting as *Finnegans Wake* does to literature, isolated and inimitable; it has been called everything from a masterpiece to a tremendous hoax, and to this day there are no standards by which it can be judged. Duchamp invented a new physics to explain its "laws," a new mathematics to fix the units of measurement of the new physics, and a condensed, poetic language to formulate its ideas, which he jotted down on scraps of paper as they occurred to him and stored away in a green cardboard box for future reference.¹

¹ *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant-Garde* (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), p. 20.