

Flash Art

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Anaesthetic objects/aesthetic subjects

I would like to thank Simon for inviting me here and for leaving me the complete freedom to intervene in the context of this seminar. In fact I will use this freedom to bring you to a specific place. Rather than speaking about the aesthetic object I would like to talk today about the anaesthetic object, or the anti-aesthetic object, that is the ready-made in the definition that Duchamp himself gave of it. "The choice of the ready-made - he writes in *About the "Ready-mades"* in 1961 - was never dictated by some aesthetic deflection. This choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference, matched with a total absence of good or bad taste...in fact a complete anaesthesia".

I would like to start from this point - the ready-made as an aesthetic object that has no aesthetic, or whose principle of individuation is not aesthetic, - to lead you to the movement of subjectivisation that will eventually bring us to the (whatever singularity), the coming community. Certainly all of you know the story of the term ready-made, but maybe it's useful to go briefly back on it.

Toute faite

There is a certified proximity between the words 'prêt-à-porter' and 'ready-made', even though Duchamp will use the French expression 'toute faite' in order to describe this kind of sculptures. Meanwhile Gervais instructs us about the way the expression ready-made progressed hand in hand with industry and with the most flourishing one, the textile industry. In Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* we can read that "The use of ready in the sense of "dressed" is found as late as the beginning of the 17th century. "Is she ready?" = is she dressed"¹. In 1844 people currently spoke about 'ready-made clothes' in contrast to others of the same kind which are made to order.

The mechanical production differentiates the ready-made from another type of artwork. The absence of the hand of the artist from the act of creation modifies its trajectory: it now proceeds from the brain to the object without even touching the body.

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Claire FONTAINE 10/25/09 3:54 PM
Deleted: <#>We know from the *Dictionnaire Abregé du Surréalisme* (1938) that the ready-made is a usual object promoted to the dignity of artwork by the choice of the artist. A choice and its instant are the only characteristics that provoke the transubstantiation from the banal object to the work of art.





34



38



40



42

NEWS

31
PERFORMA 09
Nicola Trezzi

32
L.A.'S ALLIANCE OF ART AND DESIGN
Ann Martens

34
SPHÈRES 2009
Emanuele Fontanesi

BAIBAKOV ART PROJECTS
Yulia Tikhonova

36
THE 31ST PANORAMA OF BRAZILIAN ART
Fabio Cypriano

THE BAMAKO ENCOUNTERS 2009
Kerstin Winking

38
A DRAMATIC "SECOND LIFE" FOR CAO FEI
Davide Quadrio

BAK: THE 1ST FORMER WEST CONGRESS
Andrea Wiarda and Patricia Pulles

FEATURES

40
BRANDHORST
Pirkko Rathgeber

42
DIEGO PERRONE AND SIMONE BERTI
Samuele Menin

From top:
Claire Fontaine, Draft for aesthetic subjects anaesthetic object, 2009. Special project for Flash Art International. Courtesy the artist.
Hans Haacke, West Bank 1994 - 27th Year of Occupation, 2007/09. Installation view at The Fear Society, Pabellón de la Urgencia, Arsenale Novissimo, the Venice Biennale 2009. © Hans Haacke / VG Bild-Kunst.
Tacita Dean, Day for Night, 2009. Location photograph (detail), 16mm colour film, mute, 10 mins. Courtesy the artist; Frith Street, London; Marian Goodman, New York / Paris; Fondazione Nicola Trussardi, Milan.

Covers of Flash Art International, January-February 2010.

Artist	Work	Year
Claire Fontaine	Draft for aesthetic subjects anaesthetic object	2009
Hans Haacke	West Bank 1994 - 27th Year of Occupation	2007/09
Tacita Dean	Day for Night	2009



Readymade

GENEALOGY OF A CONCEPT

Claire Fontaine

1

The readymade is an aesthetic object that has no aesthetics, or whose principle of individuation is not aesthetic. "The choice of the readymades," Duchamp writes in "Apropos of Readymades" in 1961, "was never dictated by aesthetic delectation." Instead, it was "based on a reaction of visual indifference ... a complete anesthesia." In the *Dictionnaire Abregé du Surréalisme* (1938) it states that the ready-made is a usual object promoted to the dignity of an artwork by the choice of the artist.



Untitled
2008
Moulded latex ready made arm, super copy rolex
34 x 8 x 8 cm
Courtesy Neu, Berlin
Private collection, New York

2

Duchamp said in an interview with Guy Viau in May 1960 that the readymade "is an artwork that is not an artwork [...] made by the hand of the artist. It is an artwork that becomes an artwork because I declare or the artist declares it is an artwork without any participation of the hand of this very artist to make it." But as soon as the hand of the artist is not involved in the production of the art object we see that the role and the definition of the artist change. Three years later Duchamp was telling Francis Roberts that "a readymade is a work of art without an artist to make it, if I may simplify the definition. This was not the act of an artist, but of a non-artist, an artisan if you want. I wanted to change the status of the artist or at least to change the norms used for defining an artist."



Untitled, (We are all, I & III)
2007-09 (detail)
Stencil painting, graphite and gouache, silkscreen on paper
91 x 91 cm
Courtesy the artist
Collection Jaques and Miriam Salomon, Paris

3

One possible interpretation of the facts is that Duchamp used his authority as a renowned painter and important figure of the Parisian salons to intercede for the acceptance of vulgar objects in the exclusive and fortified field of art. Material creatures as unrefined and uncanny as Kafka's "Odradek" became major artworks because they were chosen. These 'things' announced a new lineage for the artworks that directly descended from the head of the artist rather than from his hand and were the citizens of an immaterial republic ruled by instinct and free association, where beauty is perfectly irrelevant.

4

The artist and his work — born from the brain and brought into the world without the help of the creative hand — now has a relationship deprived of intimacy and infused with irony. The machines, producers and often protagonists of the artwork are there to reveal the conflict between the objects and the human body.



Untitled (from the series secret painting)
2009
Enamel on wood
33 x 40 x 2.5 cm
Courtesy the artist, Neu, Berlin
Private Collection, Germany
Photo: Gunter Lepkowski

5

There would be no point in holding against Duchamp the fact that readymades possess an aura — even a stronger one than many other artworks — and that they have been co-opted by the art system, as Dan Graham suggests in "My Position." Duchamp was the first to believe in the magic of the creative process he had started, if not its result. In an interview with Katharine Kuh in 1961 he said, "The curious thing about the readymade is that I've never been able to arrive at a definition or explanation that fully satisfies me. There is still magic in the idea, so I'd rather keep it that way than try to be esoteric about it."

6

What has then been interpreted as a capricious and dandy posture should be reconsidered in relation to Duchamp's conception of the artist as a 'medium,' a spiritualist. By doing so we understand why the title is so essential in the economy of the readymade. If the artist becomes the ambassador of the mute world, only language will help him to complete the decontextualization of the object. Words are in charge of bringing the spectator to the metaphysical wasteland located between metaphors and metonymies.



"Téléphone Arabe"
2007
Installation view at Air de Paris, Paris, 2007
Courtesy Air de Paris, Paris
Photo: Marc Domage

8

According to Duchamp the result of this modest and miraculous action is measurable: each artwork contains a "personal coefficient of art," which is the arithmetic relation between "what is unexpressed but was projected" and "what was unintentionally expressed." The spectator — and the spectator only — is the final judge of what Duchamp calls the 'transmutation,' the change of the inertial material into an artwork, a kind of transubstantiation. This precise conception of the creative process was expressed at the meeting of the American Federation of the Arts in Houston in April 1957, in an incredible panel that included Rudolph Arnheim, Gregory Bateson and Duchamp, who introduced himself as "the poor artist."



Change
2006
12 twenty-five cent coins, steel box-cutter blades,
solder and rivets
variable dimensions
Courtesy Neu, Berlin and the artist
Photo: Gunter Lepkowski

7

From this perspective the author of the readymade is nothing but the humble listener of the potential to be an artwork contained in any object, he is the charming prince supposed to awake the sleeping beauty within the industrial item.



Passe-Partout (Belgrade)
2009
Hacksaw blades, bicycle spokes, key-rings,
key chains, string and wire
variable dimensions
Courtesy Regina, Moscow

9

The first sketches for *The Bride* were executed in 1912, one year before the birth of the first readymade.



We are with you in the night
2008
Neon
300 x 50 cm
Courtesy Dvir, Tel Aviv

10

According to their author, *The Large Glass* (1915-1923) and the readymades result from the same concern and a similar creative process. The first step of this decisive trajectory, that Duchamp never abandoned since, can be found in the *Nude descending a staircase* (1912). In this painting he unleashed his obsession for reduction and he transformed the head of the nude into a bare line, *une ligne nue*. At this point it was clear to him that the only possible way to escape aesthetics and especially taste, "even the taste of the chocolate mill," was to stick to a form of bareness and whateverness.

In the interview realized in 1955 for Robert D. Graff's movie, *James Johnson Sweeney*, the director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York asked Duchamp if the liberation from any human intervention in painting and drawing had anything to do with the readymade. Duchamp's answer was that he came to the readymade as the last step towards the dehumanization of the artwork. The task of making the objects expressive and responsive to human feelings, which for thousands of years had been performed by artists, was at that point executed by capitalism, essentially through television. What is at stake, in the capitalist vision of the world announced by advertising, is the continuous production of a libidinal economy in which behaviors, expressions and gestures contribute to the creation of the new human body that is nothing but a successful product among others. The dehumanized artist cannot create humanized artworks, and the naissance of the readymade artist is the side effect of this state of things.

12

The colonization of physiology by industry started in the '20s and reached its peak when photography allowed pornography to circulate in mass. The images of anonymous naked bodies mechanically reproduced on paper were able to provoke sexual arousal in anyone; they were, Agamben says, "absolutely whatever." The 'whatever' singularity, protagonist of *The Coming Community*, is the subjectivity resulting from the dispassionate marriage between representative democracy and capitalism. It is the fully dehumanized human being, the one capable of the best and the worst that we come to discover in this philosophical journey. Free from any moral destiny or any ethical obligation, the contemporary member of the planetary petty bourgeoisie is the subject that fascism didn't create but simply registered and exploited.



Untitled (Tennis ball sculpture) - Version I
2008 (detail)
80 tennis balls fills with various undisclosed objects
variable dimensions
Courtesy of the artist and Chantal Crousel, Paris
Photo: Florian Kleinfenn

11

In a book from 1995, *The Coming Community*, Giorgio Agamben carefully examined the consequences of the industrialization and the commodification of the human body. In the paragraph entitled "Collants Dim" Agamben recalls the advert for Dim tights from the '70s in which the confusion of the girls' dancing bodies with the fabric covering their legs exhaled the promise of a new happiness made of the promiscuity between technology and human flesh. The very movements of the girls' legs, slightly desynchronized, had in fact been recorded separately and then edited together: even the moving image that aroused the desire was an artificial construction, the choreography had been obtained by the addition of solitude. The eroticism of the dancers was as human as the one of the engine representing the bride.



Optic (Whisky)
2008
Water fountain, whisky, plastic glass dispenser
136,5 x 31,2 x 31,4 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Chantal Crousel, Paris
Photo: Florian Kleinfenn

13

Musil, Michaux, Walser, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Valery and Pessoa were the first messengers of the arrival of these ambiguous creatures. Familiar with objects and insecure with their fellow humans, they were specimens of the same 'whatever' singularity we all belong to today.



Visions of the world (Italy)
2007
Aluminium framework, graphics applied to opal plexiglas panel
using translucent vinyl film, neon, cabling
175 x 115 x 15 cm
Courtesy the artist and T293, Naples

14

The readymade and the artist whose hand doesn't intervene in the artwork are part of the same fabricated world. Despite the revival of ecological movements, the living creature's biological innocence can no longer be opposed to the entirely synthetic organization of life at the time of the 'whatever' singularity. Our complicity with the artificial world surpasses the good will of escaping or fighting it. The strength of Duchamp in the operation of the readymade is to confront us with the fact that the artist and the artwork are prisoners of the analogy between subject and objects both of which are industrially produced. They are no longer father and son but orphan brothers.



Visions of the World (Asleep)
2008
Lightbox and digital print
90 x 70 cm
Courtesy Dvir, Tel Aviv



From left to right:

Les Refusés, V.I
2007

Two vigipirate bins, refuse sacks, plastic bottles, stoppers and water

Untitled (identité, souveraineté, et tradition), V.II
2007

3 flags, flagpoles, fittings and durst

Untitled (identité, souveraineté, et tradition), V.III
2007

3 flags, flagpoles, fittings and durst

Installation view at the Lyon Biennial, 2007
IAC, Villeurbanne

Courtesy Air de Paris / Chantal Crousel, Paris
Photo: Blaise Adillon

16

In *Male Poetics* David Hopkins reconstructs the genealogy of Duchamp's mechanical, diagrammatic representations starting from the small painting *Coffee Mill* realized in 1911 for the kitchen of his brother. But the implications of portraying machines effectively developed later for Duchamp and his acolytes. Picabia's machinist drawings started to become more specific and more interesting during his stay with Duchamp in New York in 1915, beginning with *Daughter Born without a Mother* (1915) and culminating in a set of portraits of machines published in Stieglitz's journal *291* from the July-August issue of the same year.

The title *Daughter Born without a Mother* deeply referred to the condition of the mechanical object as an orphan and underlined its abandonment in the land of human beings; the expression actually came from an article published in *291* by Paul Haviland (September-October issue 1915) where he wrote "we are living in the age of the machine. Man made the machine in his own image. She has lungs which act; a heart which beats; a nervous system through which runs electricity [...]. The machine is his daughter born without a mother." Beyond the uninteresting hypothesis of a type of homosexual relationship between Duchamp, Ray and Picabia, we can spot the blossoming of a sensibility for objects within their political function, and not only their poetic potential as was the case in the surrealist fashion.



The True Artist (spiral version)
2005

Smoke drawing on ceiling, dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist and T293, Naples

17

The celibate artist who escapes procreation is certainly unable to share the concern of the protagonist of Kafka's short story from 1917, "The Cares of a Family Man." In Kafka's novel sometimes the family father gets worried when leaving the house, seeing a bobbin named Odradek enveloped in spare threads standing on the stairs, without any purpose or aim. Odradek, he thinks, is a curious object that might appear broken but isn't, that is senseless but in some ways complete. It laughs like someone that doesn't have lungs, like a leaf falling from a tree. Messenger of the removed that keeps coming back, Odradek is a source of unexplainable anxiety. The family father wonders if this creature would ever die, or if it could keep hobbling among his children and between his grandchildren's feet. Although this homeless and useless object — a ready-made by the looks of it — doesn't do any harm, the simple idea that it could live longer than him deeply hurts the family man. ■

Claire Fontaine is a Paris-based collective artist, founded in 2004. After lifting her name from a popular brand of school notebooks, Claire Fontaine declared herself a "readymade artist" and began to elaborate a version of neo conceptual art that often looks like other people's work. Her "assistants" are Fulvia Carnevale and James Thornhill.

This series of aphorisms, which considers the concept of the "readymade artist" has been conceived by Claire Fontaine for Flash Art International. As a prelude is one of the three covers of this issue, Draft for aesthetic subjects anaesthetic subjects.

Special thanks to Susie Anderson, archivist at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Katherine Brinson and Megan Fontanella, assistant curators at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

15

The industrialization of life conditions has been facilitated by the proliferation of images portraying the happy marriage between human beings and products. This confusion, which is more than reification and something radically different from fetishism, is a phenomenon compromising once and forever the privileged relationship between the artist and the artwork. The disquieting presence of machines symbolizing human desires in the *Large Glass*, or in Picabia and Man Ray's works, announced an irreversible affective mutation. The consequences of our desire to consume inevitably affect our way to love and to make art.



Recession Sculpture
2009

Gas meter, metal pipes, clips, gas taps, movement detector and vacuum cleaner
variable dimensions
Courtesy Regina, Moscow