



Turning into ART

*Mark vd Bergh _ Paradise encircled
(Marcel Duchamp _ Paradise)*

Mark van den Bergh

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1 Introduction

In this essay I will discuss how the role of Aesthetics influenced the artwork of the Dadaist period, specifically within the works of Marcel Duchamp. In finding the true meaning of Aesthetics I will show how the Dadaist could now approach the idea of transcendence, through Anti-Aesthetics and disfigurement.

2 Aestheticism

Aesthetic appreciation can be traced back to the thirteenth century; Umberto (1986: 65) discusses the reality of things within psychological aspects perceived in vision. Umberto formalizes how either we see objects as beautiful while the artwork should be perceived as objectively beautiful. Or how artworks are made to be beautiful, when assuming beforehand that the audiences view and perceptual understanding is subjective. I find that from these two viewpoints we recognize that our cognition is more important than the actual meaning or idea behind a single artwork.

Cognition, personal experience and our attitude towards aesthetics are formed through brain development. We all have a unique set of incidental or planned exposures to the world around, as previously mentioned in my Captivated essay (2009). Furthermore, our appreciation of a selected artwork is bombarded by codes, conditions and conventions that we seemingly need to adhere to. This all forms a foundation for how we understand art and the link between logic, vision and gratification. We can easily get lost within the translation of art, but is the inevitability of art not simply to provide enjoyment or delight?

Umbereto (1986: 67-68) goes on to explain that within the objective quality of a beautiful artwork there is a thought process. This has two functions; cognitive and affective. Here the object is subjected to consciousness, where it manifests a narrative. This in turn stimulates a sense of pleasure and attraction.

On the other hand Hospes (1992: 335-353) comments on an alternate theory; that we need to be in a “special frame of mind” or attitude to appreciate artwork. We can subdivide this attitude into several parts, which I will briefly outline. The first is a practical understanding of constant goals that we pursue such as driving to work. We only admire aesthetics when we stop briefly to look, smell, taste or listen. Second is a means to an end; where the enjoyment is found in doing a task, not just completing a task for the sake of it. We then see personal involvement; this is characterized where one’s view of any form of art is subjected to a prior experience. Fourth, we understand how ones imagination detaches/removes the aesthetic pleasure from the. One also finds that the viewer’s interest in a particular style, period or form of art regulates the attention given to the particular piece. Furthermore, an unbiased relation where one’s association to intellect or emotion are not involved. Last there is the cognitive approach where one either relates to the formal elements of art, the motive to view the piece or just perceives the art differently. Thus finding art in what we see, and the emotions attached to that; now we cannot fully comprehend why one grasps the attitude of high Art or art. But we can safely agree that upbringing (van den Bergh 2009) and attitude forms the basis to a view of art.

3 Anti-Aestheticism

Anti-Aestheticism is the complete opposite to Aestheticism. Dadaists favor the irrational and chaos, ultimately wanting to destroy any kind of structure, conformity or tradition (Jonker 2009). We can find that the ideas of Anti-Aestheticism go far beyond our visual coherency. Tristan Tzara (1918) the founder of Dada reveals that their movement doesn’t accept any theories and that they’ve “had enough” of formal ideas found in the preceding Cubist and Futurist movements. Hugo Ball (1916) goes on to state that a Dada artist is defined by doing what they want and reinventing what is commonplace in everyday life. We now find that art has lost its roots, and the distinction between life and what we thought art was has been removed.

4 Marcel Duchamp



“Among the major artists of the twentieth century, [Duchamp] seemed to offer the most viable alternatives to the emphasis of self – expression.” (John Tancock)

Duchamp, in my view, is one of the most interesting artists of the Dada movement; his journey from adolescence to his prime is incredible. He began to create art at age of fifteen, where his palette was that of the impressionists. His later discoveries of Cezanne, Baroque and Matisse led to a new outlet for this development where intentional distortion of drawing and a timid reestablishment of black were crucial. Duchamp matured with Cubism at its early stages and naturally began assimilating it (YouTube 2009a-c).

However he had a new viewpoint; instead of exploring tedious brush strokes, lines and form he opened the mind and discarded what he knew about brushes. He established that art was “not to tell a story but rather to give your retina something to consider and appreciate as art”. Later he noticed that he was not as interested in the retina. This was when music, poetry, movement and new mediums were introduced. His work varied into multiple and successive abstract line depictions - kinetic paintings, “readymade” art (which he coined) and assemblages.

In Duchamp’s Kinetic painting (Figure1. Nude descending a staircase) he removed the label of having a painting style, and simply produced something that was a mix of him and his subject matter. Through this, we can see how Duchamp expresses himself. Duchamp was not categorized as a cubist nor futurist during his kinetic paintings as the then artists of the day saw too much of the other styles within his work.



Therefore, Duchamp joined the Dada movement. However we can only see true anti-aestheticism in his readymade work.

Readymade art is the most interesting of his work, as he describes, “it is just a case of signing an object that is not necessarily liked or disliked”, thus denying a possibility to define art. Duchamp’s readymade art began in 1915 with;



Figure 2. 1915. “*Bicycle Wheel*”.

The wheel was simply turned upside down, stripped of its tire and placed on a stool; which has been signed.

Marcel Duchamp discarded the reality of a paintbrush and he endeavored to rather satisfy more than what we see, but most of all he challenged what was known as Art. This is clearly signified by the use of ordinary discarded or bought objects.

He also wrote the titles for example the snow shovel (Figure 3.) that he bought is labeled; *In advance of a Broken arm*. Here we see how Duchamp adds an elaborate title to the work and this provides enough of a characteristic to label the object as art.

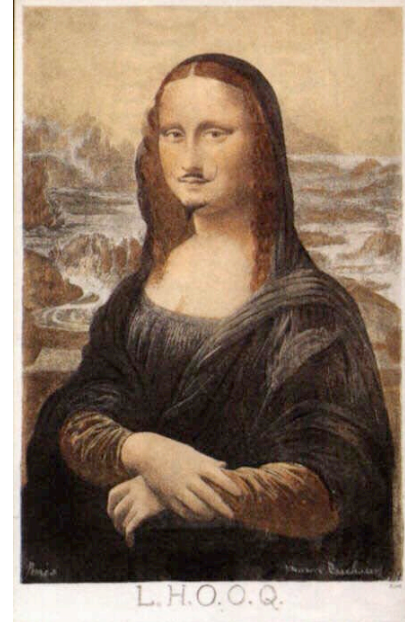


Duchamp did however cause a scene by entering *Fountain, 1917*. Into a major avant-garde exhibition under the name R. Mutt, it was refused entry and later ‘vanished’ (Understanding Duchamp 2009).

The point however that Duchamp was making is simply that Figure 4. 1917, “*Fountain,*” was

discovered and isolated from its previous function and even though it has not been hand-made; it still holds a new point of view. No different from a painting where one still isolates and controls. In essence, Dada was the ability to bring humor into the world and these 'attacks' on popular art and convention were hidden in humor and not anger.

Equally found within Figure 5. 1919, "*L.H.O.O.Q.*," here Duchamp drew on a postcard and added a thought provoking French homophone, which would need interpretation from the audience. He disfigured the *Mona Lisa*, only to remove the barrier of art and life. Duchamp clearly understood that this was a famous painting; and by adding to it he removed its serious tone. This reemphasizes the meaning and approaches a new idea that in art one should not disassociate a painting from a sculpture, a magazine to wallpaper. It is all the same.



5 Transcendence

The Dadaists rejected all positive values and hold no belief in anything (Jonker 2009). This radical philosophy is found in their art, which is not political, romantic or completely for humor; these artists challenged the minds of art critics, and that of the public. The movement is able question, rebuke, review, and make fun of all available culture in order to rise above convention. And it is here where the artist and what they made became functional. Within Duchamp's work we find that his readymade's held a function. Helen (Molesworth 1998) explains that the readymades' functions were boring but playful; here the artworks were either nailed to Duchamp's floor or held up. They get in the way within Duchamp's house which doubles as his office. Helen also alludes to a point that Duchamp was even against the management of movement, where by Science one can provide the best route through a home, or office. Duchamp just nails things to his floor haphazardly; but it was here that the artwork was used to access another dimension, found within independence and distraction (Molesworth 1998).

In creating pieces of work Duchamp removes a first glance understanding; where one can classify anything as art, not just because it is painted or sculpted, written or functional. Duchamp challenges the viewers to isolate themselves and within that one can redefine oneself.

6 Concluding

In concluding I find that Duchamp removed himself from just being an Impressionist, Cubist or Futurist Artist. Duchamp engaged the imagination and intellect of the reader removing what we knew was art, but at the same time creating art. We also see that through the disfigurement of what art is known for one can reach a unity in viewership.

7 Bibliography

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Other resources

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/nihilism>

8 List of Figures:

Figure 1. Duchamp, M. 1912. "Nude descending a staircase". Oil.

Figure 2. Duchamp, M. 1915. "Bicycle Wheel". Readymade.

Figure 3. Duchamp, M. 1915. "In advance of a Broken arm". Readymade.

Figure 4. Duchamp, M. 1917. "Fountain". Readymade.

Figure 5. Duchamp, M. 1919. "L.H.O.O.Q.". Readymade.