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DUCHAMP'S AUDIENCE

by

Venice Lombardo

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(Art History)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2010

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## Abstract

An examination of Marcel Duchamp's ideas of how art is defined, especially in regards to the role of the audience in determining whether an object is art and his challenges to how art was perceived, as demonstrated by his readymades. The struggle to define art is a significant element of society. With this paper, I argue against Duchamp's view that the audience has a monopoly on power in the artist-audience relationship, showing that the audience can be persuaded to accept an object as art based on how the object is presented. This manipulation of the audience has meaningful consequences, as the manipulator can affect much more than just the way the audience views art.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis advisor and my committee for the wonderful assistance and advice they provided me with throughout the semester, my parents for reading and critiquing the various drafts this paper went through, and my friend Mae for going through the penultimate draft with a fine tooth comb and helping me to better organize my thoughts.

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## Introduction

Main Entry: <sup>2</sup>**art**

Pronunciation: \ˈärt\

Function: *noun*

Etymology: Middle English, from Anglo-French, from Latin *art-*, *ars*

Date: 13th century

**1** : skill acquired by experience, study, or observation <the art of making friends>

**2 a** : a branch of learning: (*1*) : one of the humanities (*2*) *plural* : [liberal](#)

[arts](#) **b** *archaic* : [learning](#), [scholarship](#)

**3** : an occupation requiring knowledge or skill <the art of organ building>

**4 a** : the conscious use of skill and creative imagination especially in the production of aesthetic objects; *also* : works so produced *b* (*1*) : [fine arts](#) (*2*) : one of the fine arts (*3*) : a graphic art

**5 a** *archaic* : a skillful plan **b** : the quality or state of being artful

**6** : decorative or illustrative elements in printed matter

**synonyms** [art](#), [skill](#), [cunning](#), [artifice](#), [craft](#) mean the faculty of executing well what one has devised. [art](#) implies a personal, unanalyzable creative power <the *art* of choosing the right word>. [skill](#) stresses technical knowledge and proficiency <the *skill* of a glassblower>. [cunning](#) suggests ingenuity and subtlety in devising, inventing, or executing <a mystery plotted with great *cunning*>. [artifice](#) suggests technical skill especially in imitating things in nature <believed realism in film could be achieved only by *artifice*>. [craft](#) may imply expertness in workmanship <the *craft* of a master goldsmith>.

–Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary

What is a work of art? An object that already existed, but the artist has taken it and rearranged it into something else. Paint, a brush and a canvas rearranged: now a painting. Stone and a chisel: now a statue. Ink and paper: now a drawing. Words arranged: now a novel, a play or a poem. Sounds: a song. Wouldn’t every thing that is not in its original, pristine condition, then, be art? But why do we not display tools in a tool shop, clothes in a clothing shop or toys in a toy shop in the same way we display art in a gallery, when it too can be purchased? Rearranged words come the closest to being equal with objects. Bookstores sell books, plays and poetry the same way shops sell objects. But no one analyzes ash trays or builds theories on how a pillow should be understood like we do with words. Artworks are privileged objects. They are things, just like all other things, but art is better, more important. The distinction between art and



object is as artificial as the distinction between aristocrats and commoners. It's not there, but we believe it is. There is no such thing as art, but we believe there is.

So if the distinction between art and object is arbitrary, how is the issue of what is and isn't art determined in the first place? If there are disagreements on whether an object is art, whose opinions matter most? Artist Marcel Duchamp devoted part of his career to investigating this very issue. He created a type of object he referred to as 'readymades' in order to challenge prevailing notions of what art could and could not be, as well as writing "The Creative Act," in which he details his views on the relationship between artists and their audience. Duchamp concluded that the audience has a monopoly on the definition of art. He reasoned that an artist can make the claim that their creation is a piece of art, but if this claim is rejected by the audience, the piece will ultimately not be recorded within the history of art. However, as this work will demonstrate, the opinions of the audience can be manipulated and controlled, whether it be by the artist him/herself or others. The issue of who controls art is significant because of the greater control art grants them over society at large. This is most clearly seen with propaganda. A well-designed propaganda poster can influence the public's opinion, regardless of whether or not the information it presents is factual and a well-prepared propaganda campaign can garner widespread support for the view being presented.



**Figure 1: An American propaganda poster.**

This work will begin with an investigation of avant-garde artistic movements that set the stage for Duchamp and the movement to which he belonged, Dada. Then I will consider Reception Theory, which concerns itself with how artworks are received by their audience, in order to compare academia's views on the artist-audience relationship with Duchamp's. After exploring Duchamp in detail, this work will examine how the term 'art' has been used by various groups in order to influence the opinions of the audience. Lastly, I will discuss how later artists envisioned the artist-audience relationship and look at current issues regarding the classification of art.

#### Definition of terms

Throughout this paper, I will use the word 'creator' rather than 'artist' when I wish to avoid the implication that what has been created must necessarily be considered an artwork. I will use the term 'expert' to refer to people who are involved with art professionally though not artists themselves, i.e. critics and art historians. I will use the term 'general public' to refer to the average person who may not be well-versed in the field of art. I will also use the word 'audience' as an all-encompassing term to refer to everyone other than the creator of the object under consideration.

## The Incohérents and the Hydropathes

The Incohérents are a particularly important group to examine, as they initiated much of what later groups like the Dadaists, and Duchamp in particular, continued. In fact, it is very likely that Duchamp consciously looked to the Incohérents, as their many similarities indicate: performance artist Sapeck added a pipe to a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*, much as Duchamp added a mustache in his work *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), and the Incohérents frequently employed found objects in their works, building, for example, entire statues out of food.

The Incohérents were an avant-garde group active in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century. Writer Jules Lévy founded the movement when he organized an exhibit titled *Arts incohérents*. This was hardly his first attack on academic art, having earlier organized an exhibit of “drawings made by people who don't know how to draw.” Incohérent member Alphonse Allais published a book containing a white piece of paper titled *First Communion of Anaemic Young Girls in the Snow* (1883) as well as the sheet music for a song composed for the deaf, which consisted solely of bars of rest.<sup>1</sup>

The Incohérents grew out of a previous anti-establishment group called the Hydropathes. Many Hydropathes went on to take part in the Incohérents, including both Allais and Sapeck. The group published a periodical, though it only ran for one and a half years. Meeting regularly in cafés, it was the Hydropathes that immortalized the Chat Noir.

Like the Dadaists, provocative acts were central to the Hydropathes. They used the word *fumisme* to refer to their philosophy of “...disdain for everything...

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<sup>1</sup> Grey Art Gallery, “Counter Culture: Parisian Cabarets and the Avant-Garde, 1875-1905,” New York University, <http://www.nyu.edu/greyart/exhibits/counter/index.html>.

[characterized by] an internal madness evidenced externally by countless buffooneries.”<sup>2</sup>

Also like the Dadaists, the Hydropathes met regularly at public venues and engaged in performance art. They also worked hard to promote themselves, publishing journals (*L’Hydropathe* and later *Tout-Paris*) and establishing contacts with journalists, editors and publishers.<sup>3</sup>

In order to understand the reasons behind these groups, we need to examine what they said about themselves. Hydropathe Henri Detouche explained his feelings towards traditional art thusly: “It seems to me that in front of Michelangelo’s masterpiece, *Moses*, the true artist of today should say: I would like to do something else,” while an exhibition catalogue claimed: “Boredom, ‘tis the enemy of incoherence.”<sup>4</sup> As Phillip Dennis Cate, director of the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, explains:

...these artists and writers had no interest in repeating the aesthetic achievements of the past; rather, they wished to sweep the classical tradition off its proverbial pedestal...the artistic antics of the Incohérents and the Chat Noir circle were the means by which artists and writers counteracted the pomposity and boredom of bourgeois society and of the art-related status-quo...these kinds of acts multiplied in quantity and complexity throughout the 1880s and 1890s and mark the genesis of essential aspects of twentieth-century avant-garde aesthetics.<sup>5</sup>

It would seem that the Incohérents and Hydropathes were rebelling due to a sense of stagnation. They felt the weight of tradition had become too burdensome and that art needed to be revitalized. Creation of new, never before seen objects was vital, as was the humor they so often employed. Art was traditionally treated with great seriousness; humor, therefore, was an extremely useful tool in their attempt to break thoroughly with tradition. Humor also alleviated the overwhelming boredom these groups felt

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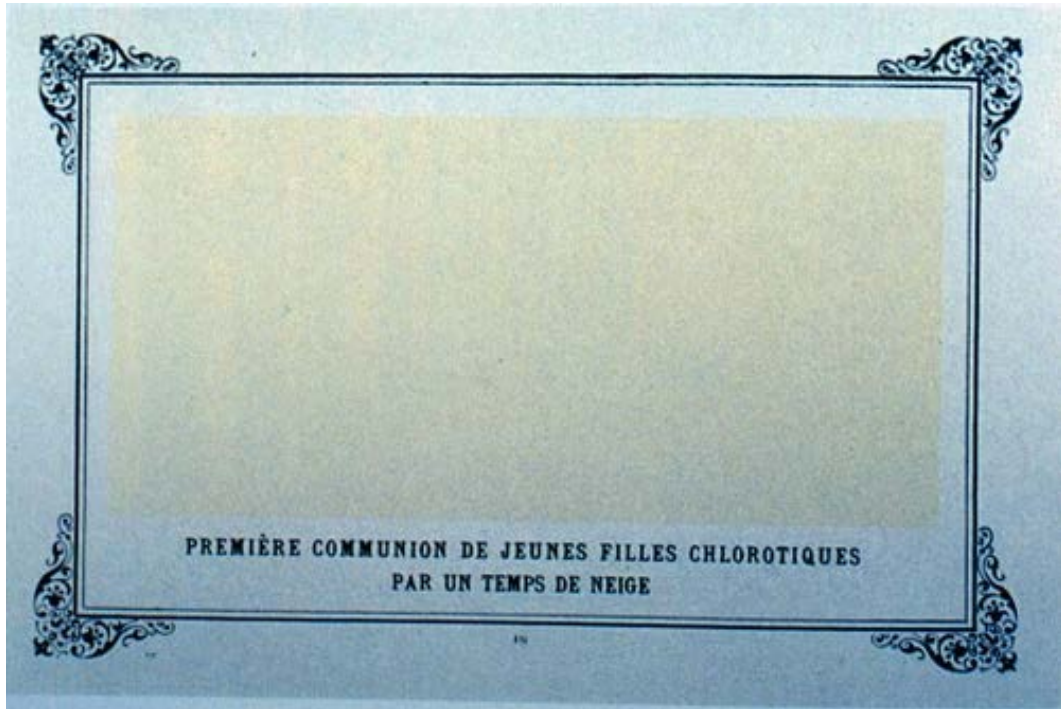
<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Phillip Dennis Cate and Mary Shaw, ed., *The Spirit of Montmartre: Cabarets, Humor, and the Avant-Garde, 1875-1905* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 104.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

contemporary society was plagued with. To the Incohérents and Hydropathes, it seems clear that society appeared to be oppressive and joyless.



**Figure 2:** *First Communion of Anaemic Young Girls in the Snow* by Alphonse Allais, 1883.

In 1897, Alphonse Allais published a book titled *Album Primo-Avrilesque* (April Fool-ish album). The book contained reproductions of works previously shown at Incohérent exhibitions in 1883 and 1884.<sup>6</sup> In all, there were seven images as well as music written for the deaf which contained only bars of rest. The images were monochromatic: black, green, yellow, red, brown, blue and white.<sup>7</sup> Thus, *First Communion* is not actually a blank piece of paper exhibited as an artwork, but rather the color white exhibited as an artwork.

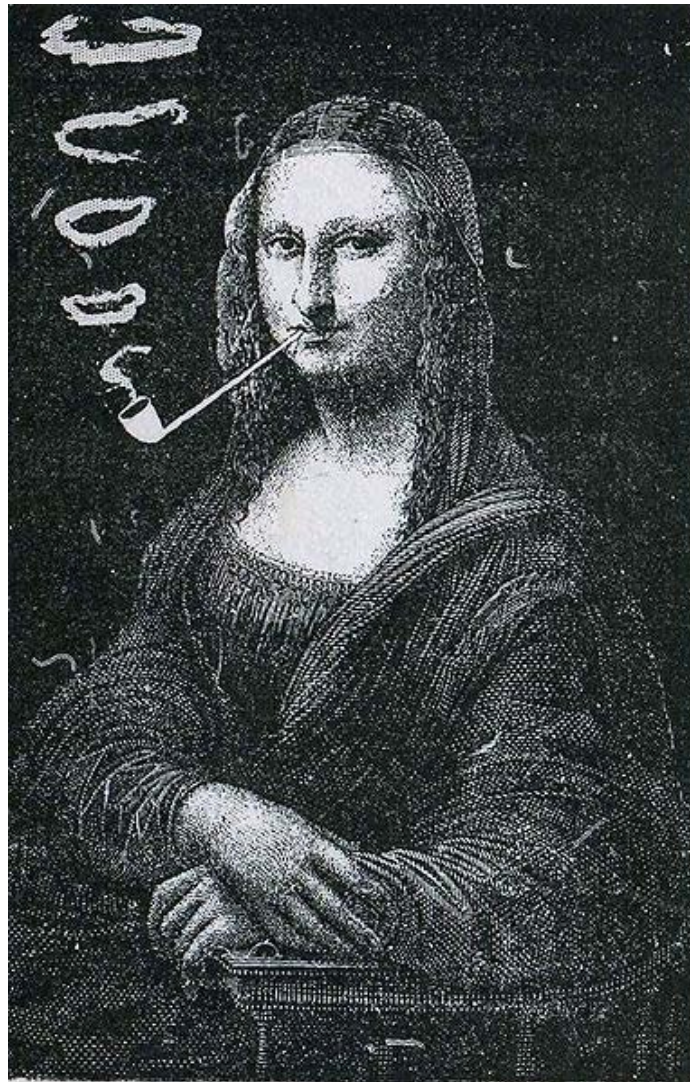
This work is typical of Incohérent and Hydropathe art in two important ways. First, it is thoroughly untraditional. Rather than depicting the external world or the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

artist's internal emotions, Allais makes color itself the subject. Color is no longer merely a tool for describing what one wants to depict, but is an end in itself. Second, humor is a vital element. Every title given to the monochrome images describes an unusual situation made even more ridiculous by the fact that they all involve one color and, thus, everything the title claims to depict is camouflaged and impossible to see.



**Figure 3: *Mona Lisa with a Pipe* by Sapeck (Eugène Bataille), 1887.**

Like Allais' book, the importance of this piece has to do with non-traditionality and humor. Unlike Allais' book, *Mona Lisa with a Pipe* is not a never-before-seen work.

Rather, the non-traditionality of it depends on the fact that it is so familiar to viewers. Hydropathe and Incohérent artist Sapeck expressed his non-traditionality by attacking traditional artworks directly. Here, he uses da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* as a symbol of traditional art, which he, the Hydropathes, and the Incohérents wanted no part of. Humor is also used in a different manner than in Allais' book. Sapeck has turned an elegant upper-class Renaissance lady into a contemporary lower-class pub-goer. With this simple act of modification, we can no longer take her seriously. She loses her power over our collective imaginations because every time we view the original *Mona Lisa*, the experience will be tarnished as we inevitably recall Sapeck's pipe.

#### Conclusions reached

From our examination of the Incohérents and the Hydropathes, we learn that they were fatigued and downright bored with their own culture. These groups viewed traditional art as a foe to be defeated in order to breathe new life into the field, and indeed were quite aggressive at times, such as with Sapeck's degradation of the *Mona Lisa*. This pioneering spirit and hostile attitude towards convention and tradition would be continued in the Incohérents' and Hydropathes' successor, Dada. Truly, when one considers that Dada would also modify the *Mona Lisa* and exhibit found objects as art, one must conclude that Dadaists were not only aware of, but deliberately looked to these earlier groups for inspiration. Without the Incohérents and Hydropathes, Marcel Duchamp and other Dadaists may have taken entirely different paths.

## Dada

“...a Dada exhibition. Another one! What’s the matter with everyone, wanting to make a museum piece out of Dada? Dada was a bomb...can you imagine anyone, around half a century after a bomb explodes, wanting to collect the pieces, sticking it together and displaying it?” – Max Ernst, Dadaist<sup>8</sup>

Dada was a staunchly anti-establishment group active in the early twentieth century which rejected all social values. It viciously attacked modern society, ridiculing every aspect of a culture which could bring the devastating destruction of World War I upon itself. This included art itself, which Dadaists felt provided society with a veneer of morality and sophistication and therefore helped to legitimize the social order. As National Gallery of Art curator Leah Dickerman explains: “...art as it was known was irretrievably implicated in the cultural values that led to the war... [Some] condemned art for functioning as a palliative that prevented moral questioning...”<sup>9</sup>

The movement was founded in the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, which opened on February 5, 1916 under the name Künstlerkneipe Voltaire (the Voltaire Artists’ Pub). The cabaret was founded and named by Hugo Ball, an avant-garde poet and writer. He had contributed to various radical periodicals such as *Die Aktion* and *Der Sturm*, advised theater troupes and founded a periodical of his own called *Revolution*, which was critical of contemporary society. He was originally supportive of WWI. He volunteered for the military three times, but was repeatedly rejected due to his health. After witnessing war-time conditions in Belgium, however, Ball completely changed his views and adopted an anti-war stance. He and partner Emmy Hennings fled to neutral Switzerland. Settling in

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in C.W.E. Bigsby, *Dada and Surrealism* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1978), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Leah Dickerman et al., *Dada* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art Publishing Office, 2005), 7.



Zürich, Ball contacted a café owner and proposed opening a cabaret, which would become the Cabaret Voltaire.<sup>10</sup>

Since many other Dadaists besides Ball had fled to escape the war, the main purpose of Dada became vocal criticism of the war itself and the Europe which had created it: “For us art is not an end in itself...but it is an opportunity for the true perception and criticism of the times we live in,” wrote Ball.<sup>11</sup> It was from this atmosphere of extreme mistrust and skepticism that Duchamp emerged. Joining the Dadaists, Duchamp would contribute to both the Paris and New York circles. It was during his time as a Dadaist that he would challenge how art was defined with his readymades, as well as mock social values and “high” art with the persona Rose Sélavy and works like *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919).

Dada was also a significant influence on Duchamp, not only in how the art world and society were viewed, but also by expanding the types of media available to make art with and in creating new ways of interacting with the audience.

### New art forms

Dada, in rejecting fine art as an accessory to a destructive culture, consciously introduced new media and everyday materials into their works in order to create an alternative. Dadaists turned to fabrics for wall hangings, needlepoint and embroidery; printed material for posters, publications and postcards; assemblages, which were three dimensional arrangements of found objects; collages, which were flat compositions of paper and/or other materials; photography for photomontages and new types of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 20-22.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 7.

photographs, such as rayographs and schadographs; and reliefs, which were three dimensional objects hung like paintings.<sup>12</sup> This provided the perfect environment for Duchamp to develop his readymades, mass-produced consumerist products which he exhibited as artworks.

### *Karawane*

On June 23, 1916 Ball debuted what he called 'Lautgedichte' (tone poems) at the Cabaret Voltaire. He named the piece *Karawane* (Caravan) and performed it before an audience dressed in cardboard. The outfit was so cumbersome that he could not actually walk and had to be carried onto the stage.<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 4: Hugo Ball performing *Karawane*.**

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 27.

The poem itself consisted of gibberish, but was recited in a serious manner. It is immediately clear that Ball intended his Lautgedichte to be an attack on traditional ideas of poetry and performance, but also on language itself and its use in society. Ball described his new poetry thusly:

In these phonetic poems, we renounce the language that journalism has abused and corrupted. We must return to the innermost alchemy of the word, we even give up the word, to keep for poetry its last and holiest refuge. We must give up writing secondhand: that is, accepting words (to say nothing of sentences) that are not newly invented for our own uses.<sup>14</sup>

Ball blames the media for ruining language. In 1916, European newspapers would have been intensely focused on reporting on WWI and an attack on journalism was, therefore, an attack on the permeation of the military and of war throughout society. Stripping words of their meanings, communication breaks down. Ideas, opinions, and ideologies can no longer be spread. Indeed, society itself would be utterly unable to function. Concepts such as morality, war or nationalism would disappear, as we would no longer be able to describe them.

*Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser DADA durch die letzte weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands*

In 1918, Dadaists Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch developed a new art form they called photomontage.<sup>15</sup> A photomontage consists of portions of multiple photographs merged together, creating a new image. Hausmann and Höch were inspired by mass-produced consumer images of the military. As Höch explains,

[It] began with our seeing an amusing oleograph on the wall of our guest room in a fisherman's cottage...It depicted – fitted in among the pompous emblems of the Empire – five standing soldiers in five different uniforms...upon whom the head

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 28.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

of the fisherman's son had five times been glued [and it served as] as a memento of the son's service as a soldier...Immediately after our return we began to do pictorial photomontage.<sup>16</sup>

Again, Dada showed concern over the influence of WWI in society. Distressed with the phenomenon of militaristic decorations and the pride displayed over a family member's participation in the war, Hausmann and Höch decided to use this medium to their own advantage.



**Figure 5: *Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser DADA durch die letzte weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands*, Hannah Höch, 1919.**

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 90

Höch's *Cut with the Kitchen Knife DADA through the last Weimar Beer Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* (1919) combines the new process of photomontage with collage and watercolors in a scathing critique of contemporary Germany. Portions of images of various people are combined to create new, fictional people. Machinery is everywhere and bits of text are scattered, sometimes forming coherent sentences and phrases, while remaining nonsense in other places. Höch shows us a Germany where people are stripped of their identities, transformed into new beings amidst the chaotic workings of mechanized industry. There is no calm or quiet here, only a frenetic energy. Society is barely able to communicate properly and is utterly irrational.

#### A new relationship with the audience

Dada set out to redefine art entirely. The group was motivated by a desire for what Dadaist Hans Richter called an “absolute freedom from preconceptions” that was “unhampered by tradition, unburdened by gratitude.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, Dadaists sought to create a tabula rasa, a state of infinite, unlimited creative possibilities because they believed any and all restrictions were preventing art from evolving any further. In order to achieve their goal of redefining of art, Dada needed to change how art was viewed by others. The group accomplished this by discarding the notion that artworks were meant to be contemplated and studied by their audience. Instead, they presented works which were aggressive and thoroughly anti-intellectual. Dadaists created works deliberately designed to provoke an immediate reaction from the viewers. Gut feelings, not thoughtful pondering, was the desired response on the part of the audience. This attitude

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<sup>17</sup> Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, trans. David Britt (New York City: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1965), 34.

had been present in Dada ever since its earliest beginnings, when the Cabaret Voltaire, where Dada was born, held interactive shows which invited the audience to participate with the performers on stage.<sup>18</sup> The strategy of simultaneously attacking, yet interacting with, the audience had a clear effect on Duchamp and his work (especially his readymades), which will be examined in later chapters.

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<sup>18</sup> Dickerman, 9.

## Reception Theory

Originally emerging from the field of literary criticism, Reception Theory focuses on the audience's response to a given text. It was pioneered by German academics Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss, who felt that how the audience engages a text is equally as important as what the creator intends to express. As academic Richard Holub summarized: "literature should be treated as a dialectical process of production *and* reception."<sup>19</sup> How a text is received by the audience is a necessary factor to consider, since a work's level of popularity determines the place it will occupy within popular culture. When a person examines an artwork (reads a book, views a painting, etc.), they are not doing so in a vacuum. The work is viewed in the light of all the other works that one has encountered previously and how they react to the work is colored by their own personal tastes and preferences which have been developed through all of their previous exposures to art. As Jauss explains: "...the first reception of a work by the reader includes a test of its aesthetic value in comparison with works already read."<sup>20</sup> This means a work's popularity will change as the culture changes, as new generations are born and approach the work with different perspectives, personal experiences, values and expectations.

With its assertion that art involves a "dialectical process of production and reception," Reception Theory is clearly related to Duchamp's views on the relationship between creator and audience as described in "The Creative Act." However, Duchamp did not envision the creative process as being a dialogue between the two, but rather as an unequal relationship where the audience wields all the power.

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Robert Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*, (London: Methuen, Inc., 1984), 57.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 58.

The views of Reception Theory create a problem, however: how can one examine the actual text itself in order to compare it with various interpretations without having already interpreted it? Academic Terry Eagleton compares it to “know[ing] the light in the refrigerator is off when the door is closed.”<sup>21</sup> Reception theorist Stanley Fish has proposed that there is no such thing as an objective, un-interpreted version of a work, only interpretations of the work. Fish’s proposal redistributes the power in the artist-audience relationship and invests the audience with the power entirely. “The true writer is the reader,” Eagleton explains. “Dissatisfied with mere Iserian co-partnership...the readers have now overthrown the bosses and installed themselves in power.”<sup>22</sup> The reception theory of Fish is much more along the lines of Duchamp’s views. However, Duchamp believed that the audience controls whether a work is or is not art. Fish, on the other hand, invests the audience with much more power than that, for it is the audience, in Fish’s opinion, which controls the work itself. Despite investing the audience with more power than Duchamp did, Fish’s audience would be highly factionalized, with many interpretations of a work competing with one another. Duchamp’s audience, in contrast, would only be divided into camps which accept the work as art and don’t accept the work as art. With only two possible opinions, a majority could form easily and a popular “truth” arrived at, while Fish’s audience would have a much more difficult time developing one interpretation that constituted a majority view. Though Duchamp and Fish both agree that the audience is ultimately in control, their ideas both arrive at very different conclusions.

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<sup>21</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 73.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.



## Implications

If our reactions to an artwork are determined by all of our previous encounters with art in general, what determines which artworks we end up encountering throughout our lives? It is the particular culture, time and place to which we belong as well as history that are ultimately the deciding factors in what our opinions are. History determines which ancient artworks survive into the present. Culture, time and place affect which styles and artists will be the most popular and thus the most easily accessible. With Reception Theory, the audience is ultimately controlled by society, while Duchamp believes the opposite is true, that it is the opinions of the audience that affect our society by allowing or disallowing certain works to be remembered within the history of art.

## Biography

Marcel Duchamp was born Henri-Robert-Marcel Duchamp on July 28, 1887 in Blainville, France. He attended the single room schoolhouse in his town before leaving to attend the Lycée Corneille in 1897.<sup>23</sup> As a child, his elder brothers Gaston and Raymond quit law and medicine in order to study art. Biographer Calvin Tomkins supposes that this “must have made a considerable impression”<sup>24</sup> on Marcel. While a student at the Lycée Corneille, he studied art under Philippe Zacharie, who exhibited often at the Salon des Beaux-Arts, ultimately graduating from the school with a medal from the Société des Amis des Arts.

In 1904, Marcel moved in with his brother Gaston in the Montmartre district of Paris. After failing the entrance exam for the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, he enrolled in the Académie Julian. He quit the Académie Julian, however, in order to apprentice in a printing shop. After passing his printing exam, he served in the military, which was required of all males. Duchamp would then begin submitting works to various juried exhibits, especially the Salon d’Automne and Salon des Indépendants. Though his works were accepted, they drew no remarks from the critics of the day.<sup>25</sup> Duchamp experimented with both Cubism and Futurism as they arose before finally becoming a Dadaist. In 1923, he appeared to give up art entirely by ceasing work on *The Large Glass*, stating that it would be forever incomplete. He turned his attention to chess and completed just one more major artwork, *Étant donnés*, in his life.<sup>26</sup> He died in 1968.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (New York City: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1996), 18-26.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-40.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 250, 431.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 445-450.

## Readymades

In 1913 Duchamp constructed the first in a series of what was to be later known as readymades when he attached a bicycle wheel to a stool. Readymades were so named because the objects were “ ‘completely finished’, like off-the-peg garments...”<sup>28</sup> Though other artists were shocked (the Society of Independent Artists rejected his *Fountain* readymade, despite promising to exhibit every submission if the artist paid a mandatory fee),<sup>29</sup> Duchamp felt that readymades obeyed the very same principles as other art media, simply taken to their logical extreme. He explains thusly:

...There is always something ‘ready-made’ in a painting. You don’t make the brushes, you don’t make the colours, you don’t make the canvas. So, taking this further, removing everything, even the hand, you arrive at the Readymade...What I do is simply sign it, so that it’s me who made them...It sounds a bit odd, but it’s a natural consequence, following the reasoning the whole way.<sup>30</sup>

Not only are readymades, then, a type of art, but art in general is also a type of ready-made. After all, when one creates a sculpture, for example, one uses pre-existing tools and materials. One doesn’t start *entirely* from scratch. As Duchamp explains: “Since the tubes of paint used by the artist are manufactured and ready made products we must conclude that all the paintings in the world are ‘readymades aided’ and also works of assemblage.”<sup>31</sup>

So then, if artworks are a type of readymade, how does this affect the artist-audience relationship? By taking the process of creating art to its logical extreme, Duchamp pointed out how important the idea of process had become in defining what

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<sup>28</sup> Museum Jean Tinguely Basel, ed., *Marcel Duchamp*, (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002), 37.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>31</sup> Marcel Duchamp, “Apropos of Readymades,” in *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, by Pierre Cabanne, trans. Ron Padgett, (New York City: The Viking Press, 1971), 112.

objects are art and are not art. When process is more important than product, the final result itself is irrelevant. Art would no longer be about aesthetic objects, only about the production of objects. Readymades would easily qualify as works of art, since they undergo the same creation process. The fact that his readymades were not seen, initially, as art by everyone, however, shows that there were a great many people who were not prepared to accept the consequences of valuing process over product. By creating the readymades, Duchamp, then, seems to be asking the audience something along the lines of *are you sure this is how you want to define art?* or perhaps *do you understand what your definition really means?* Duchamp's questioning actions show both a deference to the audience, whom Duchamp believes controls art, but also defiance. The audience may control art, but Duchamp does not seem to be happy with how they've arrived at their conclusions. Thus, he reminds them of what the implications of their definition are and chides them for their foolish lack of foresight as to how this definition would affect art.

### *Pharmacy*

Dating from 1914, *Pharmacy* is a 'rectified readymade,' incorporating a reproduction of another artist's artwork which has been altered by Duchamp. He added small spots of red and green and named it *Pharmacy* because the patches of color reminded him of the colorful jars common in French pharmacies.<sup>32</sup> With this work, Duchamp explored two important concerns: appropriating other works of art for one's own and determining just how much or how little effort was required on the part of the artist to create an actual work of art. With just a few dabs of his paintbrush and virtually no effort at all, Duchamp had completed what he declared to be a new artwork. It was

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<sup>32</sup> Museum Jean Tinguely Basel, ed., 70.

identical in process to the creation of any other painting, but *Pharmacy* was clearly an attack on society's perception of the creative act. *Pharmacy* prompts us to wonder *does going through the steps in the creative process (assembling pre-existing materials and re-arranging them to form something new) always result in the creation of an artwork? Or is an artwork more than the outcome of a process?* Again, he is demanding that the audience consider more carefully how they have been defining art.



**Figure 6: *Pharmacy* by Marcel Duchamp, 1914.**

## *Fountain*

The most notorious of the readymades, *Fountain* was a urinal signed by Duchamp under the pseudonym R. Mutt. Duchamp submitted it to an exhibition held in New York City in 1917 by the Society of Independent Artists, in which he served on the Board of Directors. It was rejected, however, and in response an article entitled “The Richard Mutt Case” appeared in the publication *The Blind Man*.<sup>33</sup>

*Fountain* was even more reductionist than *Pharmacy* had been. The only alteration Duchamp made was to turn the urinal on its side. Having added nothing of his own, it was now a completed artwork. He signed and dated it, then submitted it to the exhibition. Members of the Board of Directors were torn on what should be done with the piece. Some supported including it in the show on principle, in order to keep the promise the organization made to exhibit every submission. Others wanted to reject *Fountain* on the grounds that they did not believe it was actually an artwork and that it made a mockery of everything the group stood for. The Board of Directors had not anticipated that someone might submit an object such as this and some felt that an exception should be made, since they certainly never intended to include a work like *Fountain* when they agreed to exhibit every submission. Ultimately, *Fountain* was rejected and never exhibited. Duchamp and another board member, Walter Arensberg, resigned from their posts in protest.<sup>34</sup>

The *Blind Man* article, published anonymously, argued that *Fountain* was an artwork based solely on the fact that it involved a choice on the part of the artist.

“Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance,” the

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<sup>33</sup> Sophie Howarth, “*Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp,” Tate Collection, <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=999999961&workid=26850&tabview=text&texttype=10>

<sup>34</sup> Tomkins, 182.

author wrote. “He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.”<sup>35</sup> Regardless of whether Duchamp was the author, the article raises an interesting point: a non-art object can become an art object through choice. Whether something is or isn’t art is entirely in the eye of the beholder, meaning the concept of ‘art’ is a purely subjective one. This position could easily empower the audience, as a subjective “truth” of whether something is art or not could be arrived at if a majority of the audience shared the same belief. However, the article asserts that it is only the *artist* who has this power to choose, contradicting Duchamp’s position that it is the audience which controls the label ‘art.’ Therefore, it seems unlikely that the anonymous article was written by Duchamp.



**Figure 7: *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp, 1917.**

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<sup>35</sup> Museum Jean Tinguely Basel, ed., 90.

### Engaging the audience

With his readymades, Duchamp took the Dada approach of engaging the audience through provocation. He failed, however, as the first two readymades he showed, *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (a mass-produced shovel) and *Traveler's Folding Item* (a typewriter cover), did not generate any strong feelings or reactions on the part of the audience when they were exhibited in New York City in 1916. Trying again in 1917, he chose a urinal, a far more “inappropriate” item than a shovel or typewriter cover. He also ensured that *Fountain* received a great amount of attention from the media.<sup>36</sup> This time, his provocative readymades successfully provoked. Its rejection from the exhibition was the best thing that could have happened because it was the perfect opportunity to keep *Fountain* in the public mind. His resignation was a public gesture of protest and the *Blind Man* article was a way to generate sympathy from the public by explaining how the artist R. Mutt had been wronged by an institutional elite that refused to honor its word.

### Insights gained

The failure of Duchamp's first two readymades demonstrates just how important the audience is in the creative process. Duchamp could not successfully challenge how art was perceived if no one heard his message or acknowledged his ideas. Readymades required audience participation in order to have their desired effect. In order to goad the audience into creating the situation he needed, Duchamp became much more aggressive and went out of his way to grab attention. This situation actually proves Duchamp wrong on the nature of the relationship between artist and audience. Duchamp was able to

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<sup>36</sup> Jason Gaiger, “Interpreting the readymade: Marcel Duchamp's *Bottlerack*,” in *Frameworks for Modern Art*, ed. Jason Gaiger (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 83.



manipulate the audience into behaving just the way he wanted them to. Duchamp the artist was not helpless, but was able to harness the audience's power for his own benefit. The controversy surrounding *Fountain* reveals a reality more in line with the ideas of Reception Theory, which views the relationship between artist and audience as being dialectic in nature, involving a mutual communication between the two. This mutual communication is exactly what Duchamp employed in his manipulation. With *Fountain*, he declared a mass-produced consumerist object to be art, but he also surrounded the work with publicity in order to create a grand spectacle. Because of this publicity, the audience began to form opinions about *Fountain* before they actually encountered it through the photo published alongside the *Blind Man* article or through the reproductions authorized by Duchamp later in the century. This is exactly what reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss described: all encounters with artworks are influenced by our previous experiences. Because Duchamp put so much work into influencing his audience's experience before they finally encountered *Fountain*, he was able to control and direct their reaction in the desired direction.

### Other Interpretations

Art historian Wanda Corn argues that Duchamp's readymades were a result of Duchamp's fascination with American culture, rather than an attack on the common perception of art. For example, mass-produced snow shovels were an impressive novelty to visiting avant-gardes at the time. Fellow French artist Jean Crotti, with whom Duchamp shared a studio, once took a trip to a hardware store (also a novelty). Duchamp accompanied him and "remembered very clearly how pleased and proud Crotti had

looked as he carried their purchase, slung like a rifle on his shoulder, the few blocks to their shared studio...where Duchamp, after painting on the title and signing it...tied a wire to the handle and hung it from the ceiling.”<sup>37</sup>

Corn describes how visiting Europeans in general, including Duchamp, were mesmerized by early twentieth century America. American culture differed from their own in a profound manner: Europe was not yet as industrialized as the U.S. As Corn explains, “...it is easy to imagine how futuristic a snow shovel of wood and galvanized iron hanging or stacked in multiples in a hardware store – the store itself a marvel to a foreigner – might appear to a Frenchman accustomed to streets swept of snow by brooms of straw or twigs whose design had changed little since the Middle Ages.”<sup>38</sup> Corn goes on to explain that French artists viewed America as a nation of industry and valued it for precisely this reason. Common tourist activities included trips to skyscrapers and rides in ferryboats in order to view the skyline.<sup>39</sup> Europeans were also eager to “...visit factories, to see assembly lines in operation, and to witness those manufacturing processes responsible for streamlined American industrial products.”<sup>40</sup> This view is reflected in the *Blind Man* article, which claimed that “the only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges.”<sup>41</sup> Traditional art such as painting and sculpture belonged to Europe, while America’s art was monumental architecture and mass-produced consumer products. Duchamp, likewise, fell under the spell of modernity America cast when he arrived in New York City in 1915.<sup>42</sup> Corn concludes that the effect of américanisme –

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 71.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>41</sup> Museum Jean Tinguely Basel, ed., 90.

<sup>42</sup> Corn, 49.

the exploration of America as Europe's antithesis – was the driving force behind Duchamp's creation of readymades and of *Fountain* in particular: "Although the artist argued that he chose his readymades indifferent to their aesthetic properties, evidence clearly shows that Duchamp was not random in his choices; he was always guided by the *américanisme* that shaped his first years in New York...each object neatly encapsulated a French intellectual's critique of America."<sup>43</sup> *Fountain*, if we accept Corn's argument, is not an attack on definitions of art, but rather a love letter to his adopted country.

Corn persuasively defends her argument that Europeans perceived, to the point of stereotyping, America as a nation which existed only in the present, without a long history to weigh it down, where everything was new and mechanized. While the aesthetics of mass-production have clearly influenced Duchamp, the amount of effort put into creating a media spectacle out of *Fountain's* rejection clearly shows a desire on Duchamp's part to express more than just an interest in American culture. He intentionally created a situation in which to test the resolve of the Society of Independent Artists, in order to make clear the assumptions about what can and can't be art that remained operative, despite the group's commitment to a show without a jury and without rules, where anything would be (in theory) acceptable. Once the decision was made to reject *Fountain*, Duchamp made sure that the group was publicly embarrassed. It was important to him that the general public know that, despite rejecting the idea that art should be subjected to rules and subjective criteria, in reality many prominent avant-garde artists continued to act on their own personal biases of what can and can't be art. It is clear that Duchamp drew on the results of America's industrialization in order to confront his audience with the implications of the current definitions of art.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

## Manipulating the Audience

Alex started life as an artist and one of his first jobs was painting Chinese murals in a kosher restaurant. He hates abstract painting. He once went to an exhibition where there were two canvases, both completely blank. ‘One of them won first prize,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what the other guy did wrong.’  
–Jack Paar, discussing Alexander King<sup>44</sup>

In 1957, Duchamp attended a meeting of the American Federation of the Arts, during which he presented a short speech entitled “The Creative Act.”<sup>45</sup> In his speech, he described how the creative act does not take place solely between the creator and the creation, but that the audience is a necessary participant as well. He states,

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.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, it is the artist who turns raw materials into a creation and the audience that turns a creation into art. This gives the audience, in Duchamp’s opinion, a monopoly on power. It is the audience and the audience alone that decides if a creation is art, if a creator is an artist, if an artist is a genius.

Duchamp is partially correct. It is entirely possible for a creator to make an object which he or she does not consider to be art, only for someone else to “discover” his or her work later and display it in a museum or gallery. This is particularly evident when we display objects of ancient cultures and anonymous works. Did these cultures believe these objects were art? Did these cultures believe in such a concept as art? In the case of anonymous works, it is impossible to know the intentions of the creator(s); were they

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<sup>44</sup> Jack Paar and John Reddy, *My Saber is Bent*, (New York City: Trident Press, 1961), 87.

<sup>45</sup> Michel Sanouille and Elmer Petersor, ed., *Salt Seller; The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1973), 138.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

actually creating what they considered to be art? Even though we have no way of knowing if these types of ancient or anonymous objects were meant to be artworks, we treat them as if they were anyway, based on our own society's perception of art. Here the audience is the one controlling the label 'art,' while the creators, because they are no longer alive or because their identities are not known to us, have no control whatsoever. The audience also determines which artworks are "important" or "superior" to others based on general consensus, which is essentially popularity. For example, any book on art cannot possibly discuss *every* artwork ever created. The author(s) must consciously decide which works to include and which to exclude, with the included works being the most "prominent" or "significant" examples, labels that are entirely subjective.

All creators, therefore, are entirely dependant on their audience in order to succeed. However, the artist is not completely helpless, as Duchamp supposes. In order to ensure that their works are seen as art, the artist may try to convince their audience to label their creations as art. The success of efforts by the anti-establishment Dadaists, Futurists and Surrealists is proven by the fact that these three movements are all still discussed in the context of art and art history today. The fact that these groups have succeeded, then, in changing how art is perceived within our society proves something highly significant: the definition of art can be easily changed. These groups were able to succeed due to the fact that the general public felt their arguments had merit. The general public was *persuaded* to view these objects as art. The general public can also be somewhat controlled by critics. If an artist can convince a significant number of critics that their creations are art, then the opinions of the critics, who are expected to be experts, can have a significant effect on how these works are viewed in popular culture. What

determines whether or not objects are art is the willingness on the part of the audience to label them as such, either due to manipulation on the part of the artist or a consensus among experts. Thus, an object becomes art once the creator convinces others to believe the object is art.

A particularly interesting example of society's power to control the status of "art" and "genius" came in 2009, when Yale University attempted to purchase the archives of Guy-Ernest Debord, a co-founder of both the Letterist International and the Situationist International. To prevent the sale, the French government declared Debord to be a national treasure, despite the fact that the Situationist International played a crucial role in provoking the uprisings in May 1968. The uprisings were so severe that "work stopped everywhere except among the purveyors of foodstuffs...The country was completely paralyzed, with more than 10 million people on strike."<sup>47</sup> This sudden promotion of Debord to the status of a hero was so bizarre that writer and critic Andrew Gallix claimed Debord "would be spinning in his grave – had he not been cremated..." A staunchly anti-establishment figure had now gained not just acceptance, but explicit approval from society, when what Debord truly wanted was "universal hatred."<sup>48</sup>

As for manipulating the audience, one of the best examples would be the *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) and *Große Deutsche Kunst* (Great German Art) exhibits organized by the Nazis in 1937, which were designed to show the German people the difference between "high" and "low" art. The Nazis put great effort into designing the exhibits in order to manipulate and convince the audience to accept not

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<sup>47</sup> Mattei Dogan, "How Civil War Was Avoided in France," *International Political Science Review* Vol. 5, No. 3 (1984): 247.

<sup>48</sup> Andrew Gallix, "The Resurrection of Guy Debord," *The Guardian*, March 18, 2009, Culture section. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2009/mar/18/guy-debord-situationist-international>

only these labels, but also their views on non-Aryans. The Degenerate Art exhibit was installed in the same building in which the Institute of Archaeology was located, implying that the art of this exhibit belonged to a culture that was now extinct. It was extinct, of course, because it had been terminated by the Nazis themselves, rather than failing on its own. The Great German Art exhibit, on the other hand, was installed in a building built under the Third Reich which was constructed out of durable, hardy limestone. Art historian Sandra Lotte Esslinger described this setting as “implying that the objects within were eternal and living...”<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the artworks in the Degenerate Art exhibit were hung haphazardly: crooked or upside-down and crammed together with some near the ceiling – the better to prevent the audience from seeing the art clearly. After all, these artworks violated important principles of the Third Reich and were therefore dangerous. The audience should see these works so that they may be aware of the negative influence of non-Aryans on their society, but not be exposed to them for too long, lest the audience actually carefully consider the art and become “corrupted” by it.

The Degenerate Art exhibit was highly effective at manipulating the audience into redefining avant-garde art, as art historian Peter Guenther describes:

[T]he large number of people pushing and ridiculing and proclaiming their dislike for the works of art created the impression of a stage performance intended to promote an atmosphere of aggressiveness and anger. Over and over again, people read aloud the purchase prices and laughed, shook their heads, or demanded ‘their’ money back.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Sandra Lotte Esslinger, “The Museum as a Political Media: A Semiological Assault,” in *Semiotics of the Media: State of the Art, Projects, and Perspectives*, ed. Winfried Nöth (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997), 621.

<sup>50</sup> Qtd. in Esslinger, 624.

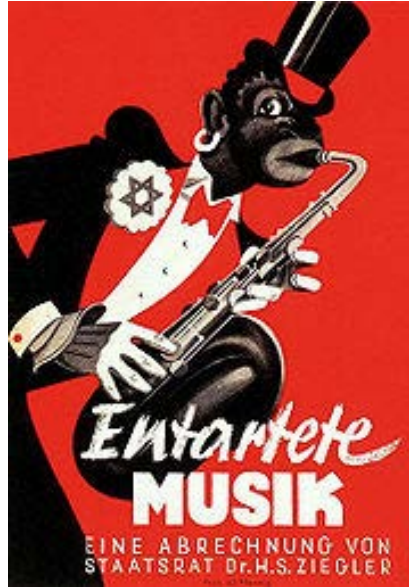
So it seems that whoever controls the audience ultimately has power over the word ‘art.’ If the artist him- or herself is able to control the audience, then Duchamp is wrong entirely, as it would be the artist in this case who, though not actually possessing power over the word ‘art,’ is the de facto authority. That means the scenario described by Duchamp in “The Creative Act” is actually only one possible way to distribute power between the artist and the audience.



**Figure 8: Hitler views the Degenerate Art exhibit.**

This example also highlights how one can gain control over society at large through the control of art. Guenther’s quote illustrates just how easily it was for the Nazis to convince their audience that not only was most modern art not “proper” art, but also that it was the product of undesirables. They specifically used a racist caricature of an African-American jazz musician wearing a Star of David for a related exhibition regarding “degenerate” music. Through these types of exhibits, the Nazis were able to use art to control their audience, offering the artworks as the proof of the harmful influence they claimed non-Aryans had on German society and convincing many.





**Figure 9: Program cover for an Entartete Musik exhibit, 1938.**

### Other perspectives

From his examination of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, philosopher Arthur Danto reached certain conclusions on how certain objects came to be perceived as art, while other objects did not. *The New Yorker* staff writer Louis Menand summarized Danto's views thusly: "the only difference between an art work, such as a sculpture that looks like a grocery carton, and a real thing, such as a grocery carton, is that the first is received as art and the second is not."<sup>51</sup> The only reason why Warhol's Brillo boxes are art and the company's Brillo boxes are not is that people encountered Warhol's in an art exhibition and the company's in their everyday lives. Warhol's boxes were special because they were presented to people in an exclusive environment. As we have seen with the Nazi's establishment of "high" and "low" art exhibitions, the opinions of a group can be easily

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<sup>51</sup> Louis Menand, "Top of the Pops: Did Andy Warhol change everything?" *The New Yorker*, January 11, 2010, 62.

swayed into viewing a work as either an art or non-art object depending on how the work is presented to them.

However, the presentation of an object is not the sole determinant of how it will be received. There is a great deal of art which divides its audience on whether it really deserves to be seen as art, Warhol being an excellent example. In response to Menand's article, reader Robert Taplin takes issue with Danto's ideas concerning how objects are received. He writes,

It seems to me that Danto doesn't understand the basic concept of representation. Everyone knows there are no Brillo pads in Warhol's boxes, because they are representations of Brillo boxes... Warhol's boxes aren't even trompe l'œil... They are in fact idealized Brillo boxes, and as such they stand as enduringly ambiguous testaments to a moment in American material culture.<sup>52</sup>

According to this counterargument, what makes Warhol's boxes art and the company's boxes non-art is the fact that Warhol's are not true Brillo boxes, but imitations. Under this definition, Duchamp's readymades would not qualify as artworks as they are all original manufactured objects, rather than imitations of manufactured objects. Art historian Molly Nesbit agrees with this view of readymades as non-art, as she writes, "Readymades were not made to ever become art."<sup>53</sup> This position makes Duchamp's readymades even more subversive: if taken as art objects, his readymades challenge previous definitions of what could and couldn't be; if taken as non-art objects, his readymades challenge the display and fetishization of art as a separate and special type of object, to be viewed and appreciated only in the company of other art objects. More importantly, it would also mean, since Duchamp claimed all artworks were some type of readymade, that all artworks are non-art.

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<sup>52</sup> Robert Taplin, letter to the editor, *The New Yorker*, February 8, 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Molly Nesbit, "Duchamp's Readymades," in *Making Mischief: Dada Invades New York*, Whitney Museum of American Art (New York City: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 253.

Assuming Duchamp intended his readymades to be non-art, it would further mean that he manipulated the audience, using the media, into believing exactly the opposite. The *Blind Man* article argues that the Society of Independent Artists were wrong to conclude that *Fountain* was not art and to reject it from their exhibition. Duchamp, then, would have manipulated his audience, not to persuade them to agree with his views, but in order to mislead them, tricking them rather than confronting them as Dada set out to do.

## Robert Rauschenberg

A later artist who also dealt with the fine line between object and art object was Robert Rauschenberg, who created a type of artwork known as a ‘combine.’ Combines are a descendant of Duchamp’s readymades in that they incorporate otherwise ordinary objects; as *Time Magazine* explains: “Rauschenberg calls his works ‘combines’ because they combine painting with props pasted or fastened to the picture.”<sup>54</sup>

Rauschenberg is considered to be a member of the Neo-Dada movement of the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. At this time, some artists began to look back at Dada, focusing on the usage of found materials and the expression of anti-aesthetic attitudes. As the Guggenheim Museum explains, “The unifying element of Neo-Dada art is its reinvestigation of Dada’s irony and its use of found objects and/or banal activities as instruments of social and aesthetic critique.”<sup>55</sup> Other than taking an interest in Dada and its ideas, Neo-Dada artists had very little in common and were never tightly organized.

Rauschenberg is indebted to Duchamp in particular for his anti-art attitudes, as he also repeatedly challenged prevailing notions of what constituted art. In its memorial article written shortly after the artist’s death in 2008, *Time Magazine* summarized his contribution to the art world:

What Rauschenberg passed on to everyone who came after him was an idea of art as a very freewheeling transaction with the world. Marcel Duchamp may have staked out something like this position sooner, but Rauschenberg gave it a more raucous charm. True, many artists have used it since as permission to make lazy, slapdash work. So did he. But every time you see anyone doing anything that isn’t supposed to be art—and calling it art—Rauschenberg is there.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> “Art: The Emperor’s Combine,” April 18, 1960. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,874070,00.html>

<sup>55</sup> “Collection Online | Neo-Dada,” Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/show-full/movement/?search=Neo-Dada>.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Lacayo, “Robert Rauschenberg: The Wild and Crazy Guy,” May 15, 2008. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1806817,00.html>

Rauschenberg's anti-establishment attitudes are most clearly found in his piece *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953). He had wanted to exhibit an erased drawing of his own, but was dissatisfied. He concluded it would have to be an important drawing and approached fellow artist Willem de Kooning. De Kooning agreed and gave Rauschenberg a drawing, which he spent a month erasing completely.<sup>57</sup>



**Figure 20: *Erased de Kooning Drawing* by Robert Rauschenberg, 1953.**

This work can be seen as a direct attack on the contemporary art world. At the time, Abstract Expressionism was dominating the field of art and de Kooning was one of its most prominent artists, described by Rauschenberg as “the most important artist of the day.”<sup>58</sup> By erasing de Kooning's work-in-progress, Rauschenberg seemed to be rejecting modern art. However, art critic Vincent Katz has argued that *Erased de Kooning*

<sup>57</sup> “Robert Rauschenberg – Erased De Kooning,” YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpCWh3IFtDQ>.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Vincent Katz, “A Genteel Iconoclasm,” Tate Etc., <http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue8/erasuregenteel.htm>.

*Drawing* should be considered in the context of Rauschenberg's "blank" paintings. Rauschenberg also created a series of paintings which were entirely white. The point of this, Katz asserts, was "to smash given ways of working."<sup>59</sup> He further argued that de Kooning was chosen, not because he represented the Abstract Expressionist movement, but simply because Rauschenberg "had a fascination with [him]."<sup>60</sup> The point of exhibiting an erased drawing was, as with the white paintings, to treat nothingness as a serious subject. Katz's argument means that this piece is not actually an attack on modern art, but on our perception of art. Art has always been about depiction. With his erased drawing and blank paintings, Rauschenberg successfully smashed given ways of working by creating art that contained no depictions. However one interprets *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, it remains clear that it is a challenge to the art world.

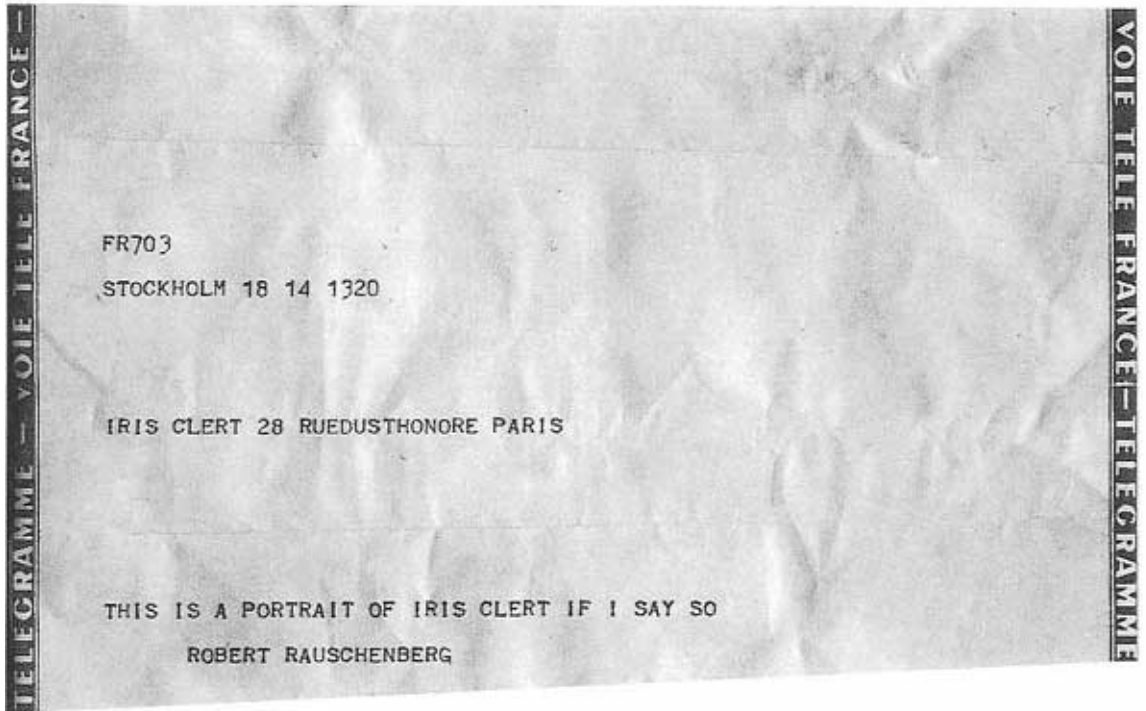
Rauschenberg differs from Duchamp in one critical manner, however: they disagree on the balance of power between artists and their audience. Rauschenberg felt that it was artists who determined whether or not an object was art. In order to create a portrait of art dealer Iris Clert, Rauschenberg sent a telegram which stated "This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Roberta Smith, "Art in Review," *The New York Times*, February 10, 1995, Arts section. <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/02/10/arts/art-in-review-021995.html>.



**Figure 11: *Portrait of Iris Clert*, Robert Rauschenberg, 1961.**

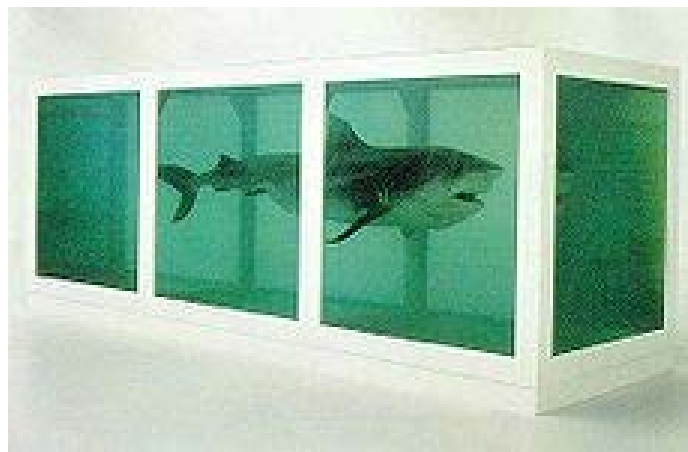
In this instance, Rauschenberg has asserted that it is he, the artist, who has determined that this telegram will become an art object. His views are much more in line with those of the anonymous author whose article was featured in *The Blind Man*. Both assert that an object becomes an art object due to a choice made by the artist, while Duchamp maintains that the artist has no control whatsoever and always remains at the mercy of the audience. While Rauschenberg is certainly indebted to the works of Duchamp, to the point where he is included in a larger movement known as Neo-Dada, his assertion that the artist controls the label of 'art' shows that he differed from Duchamp in a significant way.

## Current Disagreements

Many contemporary creators and new media have met with stiff resistance from members of the art world and the general public. Philosopher David Novitz argues that these disagreements over whether an object is or isn't art or, if it's art, whether it is good or bad art, arise from the inability of the work in question to fulfill the desires of its audience:

Such functions [of art] vary with time, but even so, we can agree that, in the very broadest sense, our interest in and concern for art arises because art characteristically performs, and is expected to perform, a eudaimonistic function... We hope and expect that it will...[afford] not just aesthetic pleasure and delight, but insights, values, and emotional understanding. The fulfillment and disappointment of these hopes and expectations...are the root causes of classificatory disputes about art.<sup>62</sup>

So when the Stuckist Movement claims that Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1992) is not art since it "does not tell us anything about death..."<sup>63</sup> it is precisely because the work does not provide them with "insights, values, and emotional understanding," though it may provide all those things and more to others.



**Figure 32:** *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* by Damien Hirst, 1992.

<sup>62</sup> David Novitz, "Disputes about Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 54, No. 2, (1996): 155.

<sup>63</sup> "Hirst's Art: Against," Channel 4, <http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/H/hirst/against.html>.



Disagreements on what is and isn't art extend to entire media. Role-playing games and video games, for example, are currently vying for the title of 'art.' Role-playing games can be easily compared to narrative art forms, as they involve a number of fictional characters interacting in situations of the participants' making. Due to the nature of role-playing games, participants necessarily must be personally invested in each game's development. Furthermore, since the characters are developed by the participants themselves, attachments are easily created. This means that a well-crafted game will ultimately "produce suspense, fear, excitement, joy, exultation, a sense of loss, and sadness—indeed, the same range of emotions as those experienced by readers of novels or by audiences to tragedies and comedies."<sup>64</sup> However, there is a critical difference between role-playing games and narrative works of art. Game researcher Satu Heliö believes that role-playing games lack an actual narrative, as "narration always requires a narrator and someone for whom the story is narrated. In games this is not the case."<sup>65</sup> One could argue that the participants work together, not only in their individual roles as characters, but also collectively to fill the role of the narrator. The participants themselves could also constitute the audience for whom the narrative is intended. Heliö takes this into account, but ultimately concludes that games, similar though they may be to narrative artworks, are more a series of events rather than an actual narrative: "...the actual actions of a game do not make it a story. We can tell stories about life, but that does not make our lives, as they happen, stories as such..."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Novitz, 154.

<sup>65</sup> Satu Heliö, "Role-Playing: A Narrative Experience and a Mindset," in *Beyond Role and Play*, ed. Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros, (Helsinki: Ropecon ry, 2004), 68.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

## Concluding Remarks

From our examination of how artists and audience interact, we can determine that Duchamp's ideas of how power in the relationship is distributed were incorrect and overly simplistic. While the audience indeed has the final say in what is and isn't art, the artist is also capable of guiding the audience into reaching the desired conclusions. Duchamp did this very thing when he launched a media campaign to persuade the public into viewing his readymades as legitimate artworks. The audience can also be manipulated by others besides the artist and Duchamp did not account for these external factors. As the Degenerate Art and High German Art exhibits clearly demonstrate, governments can also use art as a powerful and effective propaganda tool, spreading a particular ideology by using specific artworks and by presenting the art to the public in designed, carefully controlled environments.

It is clear that how art is actually defined is a complex process involving artist, the intended audience and indeed the entire society. Many different groups and individuals clamor to express their opinions and vie to win over others to their point of view. At stake is not merely the definition of a word, but also society itself. Art can be used, for better or worse, to propagate and popularize various ideas, ideologies and philosophies. Art itself can be a significant factor in the path society takes into the future.

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# KARAWANE

**jolifanto bambla ô falli bambla**

*grossiga m'pfa habla horem*

**égiga goramen**

**higo bloiko russula huju**

**hollaka hollala**

*anlogo bung*

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**bosso fataka**

**ü üü ü**

**schampa wulla wussa ólobo**

*hej tatta gôrem*

**eschige zunbada**

**wulubu ssubudu uluw ssubudu**

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## Appendix B

### “Apropos of ‘Readymades’” by Marcel Duchamp

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 MY 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.

SOMETIMES I WOULD ADD A GRAPHIC DETAIL OF PRESENTATION WHICH IN ORDER TO SATISFY MY CRAVING FOR ALLITERATIONS, WOULD BE CALLED “READYMADE AIDED.”

AT ANOTHER TIME WANTING TO EXPOSE THE BASIC ANTINOMY BETWEEN ART AND READYMADES I IMAGINED A “RECIPROCAL READYMADE”: USE A REMBRANDT AS AN IRONING BOARD!

I REALIZED VERY SOON THE DANGER OF REPEATING INDISCRIMINATELY THIS FORM OF EXPRESSION AND DECIDED TO LIMIT THE PRODUCTION OF “READYMADES” TO A SMALL NUMBER YEARLY. I WAS AWARE AT THAT TIME, THAT FOR THE SPECTATOR EVEN MORE THAN FOR THE ARTIST, ART IS A HABIT-FORMING DRUG AND I WANTED TO PROTECT MY “READYMADES” AGAINST SUCH CONTAMINATION.

ANOTHER ASPECT OF THE “READYMADE” IS ITS LACK OF UNIQUENESS. . . THE REPLICA OF A “READYMADE” DELIVERING THE SAME MESSAGE; IN FACT NEARLY EVERY ONE OF THE “READYMADES” EXISTING TODAY IS NOT AN ORIGINAL IN THE CONVENTIONAL SENSE.

A FINAL REMARK TO THIS EGOMANIAC’S DISCOURSE:

SINCE THE TUBES OF PAINT USED BY THE ARTIST ARE MANUFACTURED AND READY MADE PRODUCTS WE MUST CONCLUDE THAT ALL THE PAINTINGS IN THE WORLD ARE “READYMADES AIDED” AND ALSO WORKS OF ASSEMBLAGE.

## Appendix C

### “The Richard Mutt Case” by Anonymous

They say any artist paying six dollars may exhibit.

Mr. Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion this article disappeared and was never exhibited.

What were the grounds for refusing Mr. Mutt’s fountain:

1. Some contend it was immoral, vulgar.
2. Others, it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing.

Now, Mr. Mutt’s fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bath tub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see every day in plumbers’ show windows.

Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.

As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges.



## Appendix D

### “The Creative Act” by Marcel Duchamp

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 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.

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 any 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 that 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 the 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, satisfaction, 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 qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives a final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists.

### Author's Biography

Venice Renée Lombardo was born in Portland, Maine on October 3, 1988, but was raised in Cranston, Rhode Island and Wayne, Maine. She graduated from Maranacook Community High School in 2006. As an undergraduate, she majored in Art History with a minor in German. She is a member of the German Honors Society Delta Phi Alpha and is the recipient of an Elizabeth Warren Graves Art Fund Outstanding Art History Award.

After graduation, her immediate plans are to travel to Berlin for an internship with the German Parliament as well as teaching English in Japan through the JET Program. Her long term goals are to attend graduate school and serve in the Peace Corp.