

THE READY-MADE

Octavio Paz

The "ready-mades" are anonymous objects which the gratuitous gesture of the artist, by the simple act of choosing them, converts into "works of art." At the same time this gesture dissolves the notion of work. Contradiction is the essence of the act; it is the plastic equivalent of the pun: the latter destroys meaning, the former the idea of value. The "ready-mades" are not anti-art, like so many of the creations of Expressionism; they are *an-artistic*. The wealth of commentaries on their meaning—some of them would no doubt have made Duchamp laugh—reveals that their interest is not plastic but critical or philosophical. It would be stupid to discuss them in terms of their beauty or ugliness, as much because they transcend beauty and ugliness as because they are not works but rather question-marks or signs of negation that oppose the idea of works. The "ready-made" doesn't postulate a new set of values: it is a spanner [U.S., monkey-wrench] in the works of what we call "valuable." It is active criticism: a contemptuous dismissal of the work of art seated on its pedestal of adjectives. The critical action unfolds in two stages. The first serves the purpose of hygiene, an intellectual cleanliness: the "ready-made" is a criticism of taste; the second is an attack on the notion of the work of art.

For Duchamp good taste is no less harmful than bad. We all know that there is no essential difference between them—yesterday's bad taste is the good taste of to-day—but what is taste? It is what we call pretty, beautiful, ugly, stupendous, marvellous without having any clear understanding of its *raison d'être*: it is execution, construc-

"The Ready-Made," by Octavio Paz (editor's title). From "Duchamp's Ready-Mades," in *Marcel Duchamp, Or the Castle of Purity*, translated by Donald Gardner (London: Cape Goliard Press, 1970). Reprinted by permission of the author and Jonathan Cape, Ltd.

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tion, style, quality—the distinguishing characteristics of a work. Primitive people don't have any idea of taste; they rely on instinct and tradition, that is to say: they repeat almost instinctively certain archetypes. Although the Middle Ages and Antiquity formulated aesthetic canons, they had no knowledge of taste either. The same is true of the East and of Precolumbian America. Taste was probably born in the Renaissance and didn't become self-conscious until the Baroque period. In the eighteenth century it was the courier's mark of distinction and later, in the nineteenth, the sign of the parvenu. To-day, since popular art is extinct, it tends to propagate itself among the masses. Its birth coincides with the disappearance of religious art and its development and supremacy are due, as much as anything, to the open market for artistic objects and to the bourgeois revolution. (A similar phenomenon, though it is not identical, can be seen in certain epochs of the history of China and Japan.) "There's no law about tastes," says the Spanish proverb. In fact, taste evades both examination and judgment: it is a matter for samplers. It oscillates between instinct and fashion, style and prescription. As a notion of art it is skin-deep both in the sensuous and in the social meaning of the term: it titivates and is a mark of distinction. In the first case it reduces art to sensation; in the second it introduces a social hierarchy which is founded on a reality as mysterious and arbitrary as purity of blood or the colour of one's skin. The process has become accentuated in our time: since Impressionism painting has been converted into materials, colour, drawing, texture, sensibility, sensuality—ideas are reduced to a tube of paint and contemplation to sensation.¹ The "ready-made" is a criticism of "retinal" and manual art: after he had proved to himself that "it was the craft that dominated," Duchamp denounced the superstition of craft. The artist is not someone who makes things; his works are not pieces of workmanship—they are acts. There is a possibly unconscious echo in this attitude of the repugnance Rimbaud felt for the pen: *Quel siècle a mains!*

In its second stage the "ready-made" passes from hygiene to the criticism of art itself. In criticizing the idea of execution Duchamp doesn't claim to dissociate form from content. In art the only thing which counts is form. Or, to be more precise, forms are the transmitters of what they signify. Form projects meaning, it is an apparatus for signifying. Now, the equipment that "retinal" painting uses to signify is insignificant: it consists of impressions, sensations, secretions, ejaculations. The "ready-made" confronts this insignificance with its neutrality, its non-significance. For this reason it cannot be a beautiful

¹ According to Duchamp all modern art is "retinal"—from Impressionism, Fauvism and Cubism to abstract art and op-art, with the exception of Surrealism and a few isolated instances such as Seurat and Mondrian.

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object, or agreeable, repulsive or even interesting. Nothing is more difficult than to find an object that is really neutral: "anything can become very beautiful if the gesture is repeated often enough; this is why the number of my 'ready-mades' is very limited. . . ." The repetition of the act brings with it an immediate degradation, a relapse into taste—a fact which Duchamp's imitators frequently forget. Detached from its original context—usefulness, propaganda or ornament—the "ready-made" suddenly loses all significance and is converted into an object existing in a vacuum, into a thing without any embellishment. Only for a moment: everything that man has handled has the fatal tendency to secrete meaning. Hardly have they been installed in their new hierarchy, than the nail and the flat-iron suffer an invisible transformation and become objects for contemplation, study or irritation. Hence the need to "rectify" the "ready-made": injecting it with irony helps to preserve its anonymity and neutrality. A labour of Tantalus since, when significance and its appendages, admiration and reprobation have been deflected from the object, how can one prevent them from being directed towards the author? If the object is anonymous, the man who chose it is not. And one could even add that the "ready-made" is not a work but a gesture and a gesture which only an artist could realise and not just any artist but inevitably Marcel Duchamp. It is not surprising that the critic and the discerning public find the gesture "significant," although they are usually unable to say what it is significant of. The transition from worshipping the object to worshipping the gesture is imperceptible and instantaneous: the circle is closed. But it is a circle which binds us to ourselves: Duchamp has leapt it with agility; while I am writing these notes he is playing chess.

One stone is like another and a corkscrew is like another corkscrew. The resemblance between stones is natural and involuntary; between manufactured objects it is artificial and deliberate. The fact that all corkscrews are the same is a consequence of their significance: they are objects that have been manufactured for the purpose of drawing corks; the similarity between stones has no inherent significance. At least this is the modern attitude to nature. It hasn't always been the case. Roger Caillois points out that certain Chinese artists selected stones because they found them fascinating and turned them into works of art by the simple act of engraving or painting their name on them. The Japanese also collected stones and, as they were more ascetic, preferred them not to be too beautiful, strange or unusual: they chose ordinary round stones. To look for stones for their difference and to look for them for their similarity are not separate acts: they both affirm that nature is the creator. To select one stone among a thousand is equivalent to giving it a name. Guided by the

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principle of analogy, man gives names to nature: Rocky Mountains, Red Sea, Hell Canyon, Eagles' Nest. The name—or the signature of the artist—causes the place—or the stone—to enter the world of names; or, in other words, into the sphere of significances. The act of Duchamp uproots the object from its significance and makes an empty skin of the name: a bottle-rack without bottles. The Chinese artist affirms his identity with nature; Duchamp, his irreducible separation from it. The act of the former is one of elevation or praise; that of the latter, a criticism. For the Chinese, the Greeks, the Mayans or the Egyptians nature was a living totality, a creative being. For this reason art, according to Aristotle, is imitation: the poet imitates the creative gesture of nature. The Chinese artist follows this idea to its ultimate conclusion: he selects a stone and signs it. He inscribes his name on a piece of creation and his signature is an act of recognition; Duchamp selects a manufactured object; he inscribes his name as an act of negation and his gesture is a challenge.

The comparison between the gesture of the Chinese artist and that of Duchamp demonstrates the negative nature of the manufactured object. It is worth looking at the point a bit more closely. For the ancient world nature was a goddess and, what is more, a creator of gods—manifestations in their turn of vital energy in its three stages: birth, copulation and death. The gods are born and their birth is that of the universe itself; they fall in love (sometimes with our own women) and the earth is peopled with demigods, monsters and giants; they die and their death is the end and the resurrection of time. Objects are not born: we make them; they have no sex; nor do they die: they wear out or become inserviceable. Their tomb is the dustbin or the recasting furnace. Technology is neutral and sterile. Now, technology is the nature of modern man: it is our environment and our horizon. Of course, every work of man is a negation of nature; but at the same time it is a bridge between nature and us. Technology changes nature in a more radical and decisive manner: it throws it out. The familiar concept of the return to nature is proof that the world of technology comes between us and it: it is not a bridge but a wall. Heidegger says that technology is nihilistic because it is the most perfect and active expression of the will to power. Seen in this light the "ready-made" is a double negation: not only the gesture but the object itself is negative. Although Duchamp doesn't have the least nostalgia for the paradises or infernos of nature, he is still less a worshipper of technology. The injection of irony is a negation of technology because the manufactured object is turned into a "ready-made," a useless article.

The "ready-made" is a two-edged weapon: if it is transformed into a work of art, it spoils the gesture by desecrating it; if it preserves

its neutrality, it converts the gesture into a work. This is the trap that the majority of Duchamp's followers have fallen into: it is not easy to juggle with knives. There is another condition: the practice of the "ready-made" demands an absolute disinterest. Duchamp has earned derisory sums from his pictures—he has given most of them away—and he has always lived modestly, especially if one thinks of the fortunes which a painter accumulates to-day as soon as he enjoys a certain reputation. Harder than despising money is resisting the temptation to make works or to turn oneself into a work. I believe that, thanks to irony, Duchamp has succeeded: the "ready-made" has been his Diogenes' barrel. Because, in the end, his gesture is a philosophical or, rather, dialectical game more than an artistic operation: it is a negation which, through humour, becomes affirmation. Suspended by irony, in a state of perpetual oscillation, this affirmation is always provisional. It is a contradiction which denies all significance to object and gesture alike; it is a pure action—in the moral sense and also in the sense of a game: his hands are clean, the execution is rapid and perfect. Purity requires that the gesture should be realised in such a way that it seems as little like a *choice* as possible: "The great problem was the act of selection. I had to pick an object without it impressing me and, as far as possible, without the least intervention of any idea or suggestion of aesthetic pleasure. It was necessary to reduce my personal taste to zero. It is very difficult to select an object that has absolutely no interest for us not only on the day we pick it but which never will and which, finally, can never have the possibility of becoming beautiful, pretty, agreeable or ugly. . . ."

The act of selection bears a certain resemblance to making a rendez-vous and, for this reason, it contains an element of eroticism—a desperate eroticism without any illusions: "To decide that at a point in the future (such and such a day, hour and minute) I am going to pick a 'ready-made' . . . What is important then is chronometry, the empty moment . . . it is a sort of rendez-vous." I would add that it is a rendez-vous without any element of surprise, an encounter in a time that is arid with indifference. The "ready-made" is not only a dialectical game; it is also an ascetic exercise, a means of purgation. Unlike the practices of the mystics, its end is not union with the divinity and the contemplation of the highest truth: it is a rendez-vous with nobody and its ultimate goal is non-contemplation. The "ready-made" occupies an area of the spirit that is null: "this bottle-rack which still has no bottles, turned into a thing which one doesn't even look at, although we know that it exists—which we only look at by *turning our heads* and whose existence was decided by a gesture I made one day. . . ." A nihilism which gyrates on itself and refutes itself: it is the enthroning of a nothing and, once it is on its throne,

denying it and denying oneself. It is not an artistic act, this invention of an art of interior liberation. In the *Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*² we are told that each one of us has to endeavour to reach the blessed state of being a Bodhisattva while knowing that Bodhisattva is a non-entity, an empty name. This is what Duchamp calls the *beauty of indifference*. Or, to put it another way: freedom.

² Translated by Edward Conze, London 1961.

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