Conceptual Art

An American Perspective

Robert C. Morgan

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by

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with a foreword by

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To Doug—
who makes what is unknown visible—
and
To Bob—
who makes what is known invisible—
for their inspiration and encouragement
to make this book a reality

Foreword
(by Michael Kirby)

In 1966, I gave a lecture on Happenings at the Kansas City Art Institute. In the question period that followed, one of the young members of the audience—I assume he was a student—asked a question that made me hesitate before answering. "How can we make a work of art," he said very seriously, "that has no physical substance?" He spoke as if he himself wanted to do just that. Of course, I can no longer remember the exact words, but the question—and the thought—was precise and clear. I was momentarily shocked. The audience was shocked, too. They immediately became very attentive. The student had just "scored" a lot of "points" very quickly—with his fellow students as well as with the teachers. His listeners, being artists, knew a useful question when they heard one.

My shock came not because the question was new to me. If I had not been so familiar with it in all its various forms and possible phrasings, I would not have been shocked. (Nobody would be shocked today, but this was 1966.) I had somehow assumed, however, that it was a New York question, that it belonged in a very private way to some of the artists in the art center of the world. Yet here it was being asked, very precisely and intelligently, by an art student in the Midwest.

"I wish I knew," I said. "Everybody is trying to answer that question." The "everybody," of course, was hyperbole. I meant my friends. "I would like to answer it," I said.

Of course the student had alluded to what would come to be called *Conceptual Art.* One might define Conceptual Art as art that strives toward the absence of physicality while it knows that this is impossible. Or, to avoid the problem of impossibility, one might take off from the student's definition and... Well, I'm not going to discuss various definitions of Conceptual Art here. I leave that up to Robert Morgan. But I would like to say something about that good idea that everyone recognized and why it was good.

Two of the first exhibitions of Pop Art—at least the first ones I

remember, and I went to galleries a lot in the 1960s—were by Wayne Thiebaut and Roy Lichtenstein. At both of those exhibits, when I walked in the gallery not knowing what to expect, I laughed out loud, surprising myself. Nothing like that had happened to me before, and it has not happened since. It was not that I felt these shows were humorous. Not at all. This was laughter of sudden relief. It indicated to me just how oppressive the domination of Abstract Expressionism had been in the art world and on my own emotions in particular. When the domination was suddenly destroyed and another possibility was there with authority and strength, I felt relieved, and a laugh burst out.

Pop Art was a widening of the possibilities. Conceptual Art was a further widening of the possibilities. Here, we can put aside the old model of one "ism" reacting against the previous one and replacing it in history. That model had some usefulness, but we all know it was usually not literally true. Expressionism was not replaced by Futurism or Dada. In the twenties many "isms" existed in good health simultaneously. As the number of artists in New York began to increase, the possibilities of what you were "allowed" to do also increased.

So the first point is that Conceptual Art gave the thinking artist a way to use his mind. Let me grossly overgeneralize to make my point and say that Abstract Expressionism dealt with the unconscious and the emotions and Pop Art dealt with irrational and satirical perceptions of the everyday American culture. One was inner-directed, the other outer-directed. Both of them denied the mind, denied systematic rational thought. If Pollock thought about what he was doing, he stopped doing it. Pop Art pretended to be dumb, to not think, so that it could glorify the dumbness in society. Nobody, until Conceptual Art, was saying that the artist could be primarily a thinker. So this appealed to artists who liked to think. A lot of artists like to think. That didn't mean that the others, who liked other things more than thinking, were left out. They could do the other things. But finally, there was a thinking person's art, and the spectrum of major, mainstream, possibilities was greater. That's why the student's question was such a good one, particularly at a school. It offered something to those who liked to think more than anything else.

Imagine a circle that represents the human personality. Shouldn't there be an art that exists for every degree of the circle, for every aspect of the personality? That's what Conceptual Art did. It filled in a major part of the circle that until then had been blank, unused.

That was a long time ago, when Conceptual Art was just begin-

ning. At any rate, it seems like a long time. Is Conceptual Art over now? Should we forget it? Is it still worth thinking about it, trying to understand it? Would it be worthwhile to read a book on the subject? Yes and no.

Yes, Conceptual Art is over, it's finished, it is no longer "hot" and viable, no longer of the moment. It had its moment, and that moment is not now. That won't matter to historians, of course. They are always involved with things that are over. But artists today can forget about Conceptual Art, isn't that right?

No, we must not forget. Yes, artists as well as historians should read Robert Morgan's book. Just as poststructuralism builds on Freudian analysis and could not exist without it, many possibilities exist for a post–Conceptual Art that builds on the work of the sixties and seventies. Just as the questioning student was able to formulate an absolute position that asked for something literally impossible, one can imagine an "impure" conceptualism that makes use of whatever we have learned from the past. One can imagine an art that is to some extent conceptual, that is conceptual in some, but not all, of its aspects. That's good Postmodern thinking. Let's use everything—with Conceptualism as one of those things—and see where it gets us. Of course, the exact proportions of the mix are up to the individual.

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Chapter I

From Dada to Data: Protoconceptual Artworks and Influences

Marcel Duchamp's influence on avant-garde art in New York, which began to appear in the late fifties, was both seminal and definitive. It was during this time and throughout the sixties that a number of artists openly challenged the omnipresence of Formalist art and criticism. As an alternative to Formalism, there was a growing interest in the idea of art as a distinct entity which could exist outside the containment and encapsulation of the material object. This concern gradually developed into a somewhat diffuse phenomena collectively known as "Conceptual Art" in 1966.[1] Duchamp's interest in the inherent language structure of art as manifested in his choice of "readymades" made his work an easily adaptable resource and primary antecedent for this study. In an interview with James Sweeney in 1946, Duchamp made the following observation:

> In art there is no such thing as perfection. And a creative lull occurs always when artists of a period are satisfied to pick up a predecessor's work where he dropped it and attempt to continue what he was doing. When on the other hand you pick up something from an earlier period and adapt it to your own work an approach can be creative. The result is not new; but it is new insomuch as it is a different approach.[2]

The force of Duchamp's argument suggests that the art object, as understood in traditional aesthetic terms, can no longer exist in isolation of its context—that what is significant in art is a matter of the language construct that supports the work. In order to get beyond the mystique of the art object, Duchamp began to think in terms of the machine—to think in terms of "readymade" objects wrought from the assembly line.

Duchamp's "Readymades" and the Nonaesthetic Judgment

The term "nonretinal" was conceived by Duchamp in reference to the nineteenth century French painter Gustave Courbet, in order to protest a growing decorative trend in French painting.[3] The word appears in his vocabulary as early as 1910—shortly before he was to paint his cubist masterpiece, *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912).[4] A few years later, Duchamp was to abandon the physical act of painting entirely. His rationale: "I was interested in ideas, not merely visual products.... I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind."[5] In 1913, he attached a bicycle wheel upside-down on a common stool; this gesture involved a minimum of construction and physical effort. His first real "readymade," according to critic Jack Burnham, came a year later; in this case, the construction was eliminated altogether.[6] Duchamp simply selected a rack for drying bottles—a manufactured item of the day—and brought it home to affix his signature.

"Nonretinal" art is perhaps best defined in the following statement where the artist assesses his method of selecting a "readymade":

> A point that I want very much to establish is that the choice of these "readymades" was never dictated by aesthetic delectation....
>
> The 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 anaesthesia.[7]

Throughout his work on the *Large Glass* (1915–1923),[8] generally recognized as his greatest achievement, Duchamp maintained a collection of fragmentary notes and diagrams which he kept in a box. These notations, lately published as *The Green Box*,[9] provide important clues and explanations to his thinking processes including certain "specifications" for the "readymades." He states:

> The *important thing then is just* this matter of timing, this snapshot effect, like a speech delivered on no matter what occasion but *at such and such an hour.* It is a kind of rendezvous.
>
> —Naturally inscribe that date, hour, minute, on the readymade as *information.*
>
> also the serial characteristic of the readymade.[10]

This notation is particularly crucial to the emphasis placed upon the role of documentation in Duchamp's selection process. The "information" is not in reference to the object but to the event. The object is deliberately abstracted or deemphasized. It merely becomes a focus for the artist's activity wherein another context of meaning may be directed.

The theorist and critic Octavio Paz offers the ensuing interpretation:

> The act of selection bears a certain resemblance to making a rendezvous and, for this reason, it contains an element of eroticism—a desparate eroticism without any illusions . . . 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.[11]

There appears to be an existential posture in Duchamp's activity as indicated by Paz. The goal of "noncontemplation" seems borne out of a rejection of the industrial world; for the artist to accept his role in this world, it becomes necessary to confront boredom as the underlying condition. Another critic, Rudi Blesh, characterized Duchamp's willingness towards indifference with this statement: "He made something positive of it in a very personal way; he arrived at complete detachment; he could participate in life without self-involvement."[12]

Although the artist's activities and actions may stem from a series of existential confrontations, the actual manifestation of the activity in the realm of art is connected to its language and how it functions within the syntax of language-structure. The anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss believes,

> . . . it is not every object in itself which is a work of art, but certain arrangements, or patterns, or relationships between objects. It is exactly the same thing as with words of a language—in themselves they are almost devoid of significance and only acquire a sense from their context. . . . In the case of "ready-mades" . . . it is the "sentences" made with objects which have a meaning and not the single object in itself. . . . The "ready-made" is an object within a context of objects. . . .[13]

The meaning of the "readymades" is both syntactical and contextual; it resides within a semiotic construct. The problem of form may

be expressed in terms of language, but its content tends toward obscurity—to baffle the mind of the beholder. How does "noncontemplation," as expressed by the critic Octavio Paz fit into the decision-making process by which the artist Marcel Duchamp apparently suspends all judgment of aesthetic reference?

This problem might be considered from the standpoint of phenomenology, of which there are a number of possible applications to language and aesthetics. The revival of the Greek term *epoché* by the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl[14] is a "bracketing" procedure, whereby the receiver suspends any reference to causal beliefs or scientific reasoning in considering the true essence of worldly things. In the case of the "readymades," this approach might be used as a way of clarifying the experience of encountering one of these objects. The shift of context from that of utilitarian association to a functionless entity might begin to reveal some basis for consciousness through the reconstructing of language significations; this latter step, however, moves away from Husserl's *epoché* into the investigation of semiotics. The thinker who did much to bridge this reconstruction process was Husserl's student Martin Heidegger.[15] In Heidegger, a clue is provided to the interpretation of "noncontemplation." The issue is specifically addressed in his enactment of a conversation between a Scientist, a Teacher and a Scholar. It goes as follows:

> *Scientist:* As I see more clearly just now, all during our conversation I have been waiting for the arrival of the nature of thinking. But waiting itself has become clearer to me now and therewith this too, that presumably we all become more waitful along our path.
>
> *Teacher:* Can you tell us how this is so?
>
> *Scientist:* I'll be glad to try, providing I don't have to run the risk that you will at once pin me down to particular words.
>
> *Teacher:* In our conversations, we don't usually do that.
>
> *Scholar:* Rather, we see to it that we move freely in the realm of words.
>
> *Teacher:* Because a word does not and never can represent anything; but signifies something, that is, shows something as abiding into the range of its expressibility.
>
> *Scientist:* I am to say why I came to wait and the way I succeeded in clarifying the nature of thinking. I tried to release myself of all representing, because waiting moves into openness without re-presenting anything. And, released from re-presenting, I tried to release myself purely to that-which regions because that-which regions is the opening of openness.[16]

In considering Heidegger's term "that-which regions" as the cause or motivation for determining a selection of a more or less commonly manufactured object, the purpose of Duchamp's activity may become more apparent. Duchamp's "rendezvous" is undoubtedly based on some degree of chance operations. Although the intent may be specified, the result never is. The absence of aesthetic from the decision-making process does not preclude the unconscious allegiance to symbolic gesture. There is some evidence that the "readymades" were in fact literal devices in the sense that thoughts can be expressed in quite literal terms. While not "re-presenting" anything as formal art, there is a superficial congruence between the existential act and toward "that-which regions." This relationship may account for the paradoxical time of relationship between representation as language by way of the "readymades" and Heidegger's "openness without re-presenting anything."

This conjecture may equally apply to what Duchamp refers to as the "snapshot effect"—that moment of transition betwen the visual attributes and the verbal epithets that define an object. The result of this effect leaves nothing but the absence of the object, its snapshot or afterimage. It is an effect to contemplate, a gesture of the mind, a simultaneity of past and present tenses—the documentation of a rendezvous. In this analogy, Heidegger's representation evaporates into the mist of "that-which regions."

It is important to note that "Apropos of Readymades" was not written until 1961—nearly forty years after Duchamp's first "readymade," *Bicycle Wheel* (1913).[17] Duchamp's later reflections are perhaps mellowed in respect to the original act. The New York Dadaists, with whom Duchamp was associated, fomented a counterart spirit; hence, they were instrumental in bringing an audience to the "readymades." Another Dadaist, Hans Richter, explains:

> Art has been "thought through to a conclusion"; in other words, eliminated. Nothing, *nihil,* is all that is left. An illusion has been dispelled by the use of logic. In place of the illusion there is a vacuum with no moral or ethical attributes. This declaration of nothingness is free from cynicism and from regret. It is the factual revelation of a situation with which we have to come to terms!—a situation which Duchamp seems to have discovered rather than created.[18]

The existential overtones are implicit in Richter's commentary; and yet, the use of the object, whether created or discovered, gives the

activity a sense of ritual. From a phenomenological viewpoint, the object becomes a wedge between the artist's existence and a clue to his own essence. Duchamp's apparent "detachment" from the situation, in which the selection process epitomizes a rendezvous, implies some means toward an experience of transcendence. Therefore, the artist's decision to choose a common utensil as art symbolizes an "existential moment: the act of liberation which occurs within "the transcendence of the ego."[19] It is precisely this release from the ego as a foregrounded tendency in the creative process that Duchamp sought as a means toward avoiding overdetermination.[20] Critic Arturo Schwarz views Duchamp's actions in a similar way:

> To fulfill Duchamp's vision of the disappearance of the distinction between the artist and the layman implies, naturally, a degree of freedom that is not even imaginable today—a kind of freedom that is both a prerequisite for and a consequence of creating art, a kind of freedom that can only exist in a situation in which there is a future completely open to unlimited adventures. . . .[21]

By relinquishing the traditional dependence on the art medium as a qualitative determinant of the creative act, a new freedom emerged in terms of how the object would be understood in relationship to the artist's work. The new freedom not only changed the role of what the artist could do and call "art," but it also changed the role of critical inquiry in relation to the work's aesthetic status. Judgments of "quality" were no longer dependent on the notion that the object served as a kind of relic-container for the presence of art. Duchamp changed the emphasis in terms of how one might interpret and evaluate the object by shifting the context of significance away from a purely "retinal" quality to one in which the idea of art was a predominant issue. This syntactical shift seemed to question the purpose of art at both the critical and the metacritical level.

In his essay "The Quality Problem," the artist Bruce Boice argues against notions of quality in painting which he believes are inconsistent with the issues of certain post-Minimal trends of the 1970s. Boice's argument is indebted to the "readymades" to the extent that the receiving of an artwork may be akin to that of confronting any object which evokes questions about its aesthetic purpose:

> If art has a purpose, that purpose is not contained within the art work itself, but within the experience of the art work, that is, within someone's

> experience of the art work. When a stone is evaluated within the context of a purpose, that purpose is not somehow the stone's purpose; what is meant by the stone's having a purpose is that someone has a purpose for the stone. Similarly, an art work has a purpose only in the sense that someone has a purpose for it.[22]

While this statement seems to grasp the nature of aesthetic experience on some intuitive level, not unrelated to the philosophy of John Dewey, Boice departs from Duchamp by not dismissing retinal values in art altogether. Furthermore, Boice is incorrect in assuming that quality cannot be instigated by the art work in relation to the viewer's response. In the case of Duchamp, quality is something that exists outside of the retinal yet within the work's structural paradigm. This paradigm would necessarily have to include irony and a certain degree of skepticism as well.

In the "readymades," Duchamp displaces their original industrial and manufactured purpose in order to objectify them within the context of a nonutilitarian and nonaesthetic role. His appropriation of the French word *cervelle* (literally translated as "brain-fact") describes a fundamental aspect of Duchamp's work in relation to this new content or absence of content.[23] By transforming the context of the object—from purpose to purposelessness, from actual form to a "pictorial nominalism"[24]—it takes on the meaning of something conceptual; that is to say, it is transformed into a *cervelle*. It becomes an isolated fact in time/space, a thought suspended. A certain degree of immanence is implied here. The alien industrial object may be observed in its separateness as something released from representation, an object possessed by its own sign.

As part of his studio environment in New York, Duchamp made a point by suspending some of the "readymades" from the ceiling and walls in order to perceptually alter their normative functional appearance. They were not intended as works of sculpture, to be shown on pedestals, but rather to exist independently from either art or life: they hovered somewhere in between. According to Arturo Schwarz:

> Readymades can be approached from at least six nonconflicting viewpoints: one may discern their magic, fetish-like quality; their aesthetic importance; their symbolic value; their iconoclastic virtue; their relationship to the Large Glass; and finally, and more importantly, one may see them as a successful attempt to bridge the gap between art and life.[25]

Duchamp's displacement of the object became a catalyst toward language. It allowed the transformation of the object to move from a physical towards a conceptual frame of reference, thus establishing the *cervelle* within a mode of receivership. The fact that Duchamp could declare a common snow shovel a work of art was enough to make it so. The artist's declaration became synonymous with the choice. In linguistic terms, the signifier and the signified became a sign. The sign became an icon in relation to Duchamp's cynical machine aesthetics as epitomized in the *Large Glass*. The sign was tied—betrothed, as it were—to its iconic inscription, its referent. Once the sign was declared separate from its normative functional definition, another level of signification would appear. In other words, the "readymade" as *cervelle*—as a sign—was free from its former life, its predictable syntax, and given a new life within another system of language. It is impossible to deny that the sign retained certain resonances from its former usage. Duchamp was aware of the tension and found it paradoxically amusing.

Although the snow shovel was transformed into a "readymade" and given a title, *In Advance of a Broken Arm* (1915), the action did not entirely negate the apprehension of its previous function. By its transformation, the artist declared it functionless, but functionless within the terms of the game. There was always the possibility that it could be restored to its original use. Its suspension, therefore, was temporally based. Yet in its new temporary context, the work could exist conceptually as a *cervelle*.

The placement of the shovel, suspended from the ceiling of the artist's studio, gave it the appearance of a remnant. Its physical existence became secondary to its existence as a *cervelle*. By continuing to exist on the physical level, it persisted as an object of potential or past use—an object with a history and one with a certain technology. This display of the shovel might prolong the possibility of an aesthetic experience or recognition, or it might function as a catalyst, even though the artist's decision to declare it a "readymade" presumably held no aesthetic delectation.

There are essentially two actions in relation to the "readymades" which need to be accounted for. First, there is the activity of selection, the rendezvous with the object, the moment in which an artwork is declared—though not made—by way of negation; that is, by declaring the object, once defined according to function, functionless. Secondly, there is the actual physical displacement of the object which becomes