TYRUS MILLER

Reviving Political Aesthetics (After Duchamp, Even)

Sometime in 1912, Marcel Duchamp began his practice of taking a mass-produced object of everyday use and inscribing it with a sentence "meant to carry the mind of the spectator towards other regions more verbal."[1] He called these artistic manifestations of the domestic object, detoured through verbal-visual punning into the realm of the concept, his "readymades." As a passage from his notes indicates, Duchamp thought of these not as mere brute objects, but rather as material vehicles by which a conceptual content, whether functionally implicit or linguistically signified, could be borne into the situation of artistic apprehension:

> Razor blades which cut well and razor blades which no longer cut
> The first have "cuttage" in reserve
> —Use this "cuttage" or "cuttation"[2]

Thus, Duchamp's interest was not immediately in the object-character of the particular readymade, the razor blade; the object was only used as mediation for an invisible set of relations, as the support of its functional capacity to perform an action, here conceived in the term "cuttage" or "cuttation" as an intrinsic though virtual quality of the object itself. Moreover, this quality-action that resides virtually in a razor blade is not one of indifferent content intellectually and artistically, however externally indifferent the object itself is. The defining quality of the razor blade is, for Duchamp, something like an abstract capacity of this object to divide, to make one part distinct from another, to "analyze." It is as if for him this readymade were an answer to a riddle posed to the spectator: how is a razor blade like the human mind? Answer: both of these can take things

[1] Marcel Duchamp, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp,* ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Da Capo, 1973), 141.

[2] Duchamp, *Writings*, 31.

apart, divide things up into smaller pieces, and be applied to its object with intensities ranging from delicate surgical precision to eviscerating violence. At a more hidden level, both depend crucially on their relation to the human hand for their potential to be enacted: a quite surprising implication to find in Duchamp, an artist typically seen as an early precursor of conceptual art, who pushed modern art decisively away from the traditional relationship between art and manual skill, relinquishing the handicraft of fine arts technique. But, Duchamp implicitly concludes, if a razor blade can adequately represent both the analytical activities of the mind and the coordinating, executing capabilities of the hand, why should it not be as legitimate an expression of my artistic singularity as any painting, sculpture, or drawing I might otherwise create? Why should I not simply sign the blade itself as my own work of art?

Duchamp believed that one should see in the readymade a reserve of meaning contained in the words and socially conventional relationships that interpenetrate with the object and surround it like an invisible penumbra—a semantic potential latent in its situation of production as well as its circulation in contexts of consumption and use. Despite the voluminous commentary that Duchamp's work has occasioned, this distinction between the cutting tool as object and the conceptual "cuttage" that the object may hoard and transfer to new contexts has not always been sufficiently noted by philosophers writing about Duchamp. Although there is now a quarter century of art-critical discussion of Duchamp's readymades (and other works) as complex semiotic and conceptual operators,[3] it

---

[3] Among these include: Dawn Ades, Neil Cox, and David Hopkins, *Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999); Jean Clair, *Duchamp et la photographie* (Paris: Editions du Chêne, 1977); Jean Clair, "Opticeries," *October* 5 (1978): 101-2; Hubert Damisch, "The Duchamp Defense," *October* 10 (1979): 3-28; *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Thierry De Duve (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991); *Duchamp: Passim*, ed. Anthony Hill (Singapore: G + B International, 1994); David Joselit, *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp, 1910-1941* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998); Dalia Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995); Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985); Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1977); Annette Michelson, "Anemic Cinema: Reflections on an Emblematic Work," *Artforum* 12/2 (1973): 64-9; Francis M. Naumann, *Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (New York: Harry Abrahms, 1999); Juan Antonio Ramírez, *Duchamp: Love and Death, Even*, trans. Alexander R. Tulloch

must be admitted that discussion of them in aesthetics has more typically been cast along reductive lines that consider the readymade's status as a perverse twist to the traditional marriage of a creative artist-subject with his created artwork-object. Basically, the readymade is thought to embody a paradox between its status as a humble, everyday object and its subjective nomination as an artwork. As such, it oscillates ambiguously between the aesthetically indifferent "found" object—i.e. urinal, bottle rack, comb, snow shovel—and the artist's subjective act of selecting it out of the industrial-commodity context to translate it into the institutional context of exhibited art.

On the one hand, this reductive intepretation tends to cut the readymades off from Duchamp's other multifaceted, more apparently content-rich artistic productions, which span an impressive range of verbal explorations, conceptual games, optical experiments, allegorical constructions, installations, and works in which the performative impulse predominates. The readymades do not merely constitute an episode or an isolated mode in Duchamp's artistic career, succeeded and superseded by other more complex activities and works; they are rather key instances of his continuous, multimodal artistic creativity. On the other hand, such interpretations limit Duchamp's astonishingly fertile gesture with the readymade to a scandalous act of wit, a paradox, leaving mysterious its ability to generate successors and fresh variations. Left inexplicable, thus, is the regularity with Duchamp's exemplary practice, from the readymade and beyond, has been subsequently "revived" with aesthetic orientations that are quite distinct from Duchamp's cool irony—even with politically critical stances that one can hardly imagine deriving from this militantly apolitical Frenchman.

The primary focus of this essay will be contemporary philosophers and theorists who have "revived" to socially critical ends Marcel Duchamp's artistic thinking

---

(London: Reaktion Books, 1998); John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (London and New York: Verso, 2007); Moira Roth (with Jonathan D. Katz), *Difference / Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp, and John Cage* (Singapore: G + B Arts International, 1998); Helen Molesworth, "Work Avoidance: The Everyday Life of Marcel Duchamp's Readymades," *Art Journal* 57/4 (1998): 50-61; Helen Molesworth, ed. *Work* Ethic (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); Helen Molesworth, ed. *Part Object, Part Sculpture* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

and practice, spanning from the readymade to the complex "bachelor machines" such as the *Large Glass* and *Étant donnés* that unfold the conceptual and semantic potentials of the readymades to an almost unrecognizable degree. More generally, this discussion seeks to throw light on the politics of contemporary political aesthetics that take inspiration from avant-garde practices, referring these practices to broader social spaces, collective systems of thought, social practices, and extra-artistic institutions. I mean not only the obvious fact that avant-garde artists often tend to be critics of the existing cultural and social order, and that their work aims to challenge, shock, and provoke readers and viewers. Rather, I also want to suggest the critical-utopian dimension of their works, which may project new, possible spaces, languages, relations, and ways of thinking. Beyond being mere provocations or means of attack, avant-garde artworks may provide heuristic models or even exemplary occasions for imagining alternative social, political, cultural, and epistemic orders.[4] Philosophy and critical theory can help explicate these broader potentials of avant-garde practices. The philosophers and theorists I discuss here have made these wider implications of Duchamp's works an explicit and central issue for contemporary thought.

In what follows, I focus on three philosophically-oriented thinkers writing in French who have taken Duchamp's work as a specific model for theorizing and have developed systematic views on the basis of particular examples and ideas derived from and elaborated beyond Duchamp's artistic oeuvre: Thierry De Duve, Michel de Certeau, and Jean-François Lyotard. Each of these three thinkers discovers in Duchamp's work an occasion for reflecting on key aspects of modernity and an artistic point of entry into its problems; each, in turn, has argued for an alternative postmodern paradigm of political aesthetics taking inspiration from Duchamp's art. Each, however different otherwise, claims in Duchamp's works a reserve of political significance and help explicate its specific nature. In discussing these three thinkers in the sequence I have chosen, I wish to imply a conceptual progression, rather than a chronological or contextual one. De Duve, I argue, foregrounds the quasi-juridical issues of

---

[4] I develop this argument at greater length in in my own recent book, *Singular Examples: Artistic Politics and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

judgment that Duchamp's work mobilizes, which establishes the scene of confrontation with the art work as a trial in which judgment must be exercised; the political, emancipatory dimension of the work follows for him as an analogue of this legal scene in which post-Duchampian aesthetics plays out. De Certeau and even more so Lyotard, in contrast, take up the questions of law, government, punishment, confinement, and power raised by Duchamp's work in even more direct ways, transgressing the strictly analogical relation of art and politics that De Duve insists upon. If De Duve thus consistently sustains a relatively weak claim staked on the "as if" character of emancipatory maxims embodied by Duchamp's artworks, both De Certeau and Lyotard project the experience of Duchamp's art more emphatically into the cultural and ideological field, implying a much stronger degree of political efficacy than a mere "maxim of emancipation"—almost a paradoxical Duchampian militancy. This curious claim has the advantage of allowing more capacious appreciation of Duchamp's rich ideological-conceptual potential, which extends well beyond art-historical and aesthetic bounds into philosophical and political concerns. But this ideological richness, it must be admitted, is purchased at the cost of effacing the distinction between an artwork's indirect suggestive or disruptive power within discourses of politics, law, morality, or theory and its direct efficacy as a discursive statement. Following a detailed consideration of De Duve, De Certeau, and Lyotard, in order to situate this whole discussion in a wider philosophical perspective, I step outside this French-language context to refer to the aesthetics of Albrecht Wellmer, whose work is closely affiliated with the Frankfurt School tradition of Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas. On the basis of Wellmer's work, I offer some brief closing remarks about how modernist artworks might affect theoretical paradigms and other regimes of truth and validity in socially critical and emancipatory ways, and about the limits within which art may exert its emancipatory influence.

Thierry De Duve: From the Archeology of the Modern to Postmodern Judgment

Thierry De Duve begins his lengthy study *Kant After Duchamp* with a literary fancy. In a succession of dramatic "acts," De Duve imagines an intelligent extra-terrestrial being coming to earth and asking a series of questions about the nature of that set of artifacts and activities that earthlings refer to as "art." Through the

eyes of his outer space visitor, he surveys a wide range of frameworks in which art may be conceptualized, from traditional humanist to institutional theories of art history, from sociological theories of cultural capital to semiotic and dialectical theories of the avant-garde. This survey comprises the first two "acts" of De Duve's theoretical fiction, in which the extraterrestial poses ontological questions ("What is Art?) and ethico-political questions ("What Should Art Be?") to his object of study. In the third act, his alien turns to aesthetics, "In Which You Have Become Just Yourself And Know What Art You Like And Dislike." Here De Duve asserts the central importance of judgment to his planetary museum-visitor. Judgment allows a reappropriation of the insights of the sociological, dialectical, and semiotic theories of art that alone did not suffice to account for it. De Duve focuses on what calls for judgment, namely the feeling of "dissension" and "dissentiment"—the conflict of feelings that artworks may call up in us. The theories that were earlier left behind as inadequate now make this feeling of dissentiment an occasion for linking judgement, criticism, and knowledge:

> This conflict is what the sociologist called the competition of concurrent habitus, the historian of the avant-garde the inherent contradiction between art and anti-art, and the semiotician the dissemination of signs. But it is one thing to recognize values in conflict, and it is another to experience them.
>
> Being cultivated and being sensitive are not equivalent. To be sensitive to art is to feel the conflict of values as a conflict of feelings. [...] In calling art something conflictual and unexpected, you give your assent to the reflexive feeling of dissent [...] You give your consent to the felt absence of consensus about this thing.[5]

This shifting of the judgment of taste from the sentiment of beauty to the dissentiment of the artwork's problematic nature as such holds two key consequences. First, it changes the nature of this judgment from the ascription of a universal quality ("This is beautiful.") to the singular assignment of the very name of "art" ("This is art."). Second, it makes these nominal judgments the

---

[5] Thierry De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996).

object of dispute. De Duve places this disputation at the centre of his idea of cultural history. He redefines in "jurisprudential" terms both the conflict stressed by the dialectical historian of the avant-garde (for example, Clement Greenberg and Theodor Adorno) and the tradition articulated by traditional art and literary historians. "Jurisprudence," he writes

> is the legal memory in which society stores the judgments issued in the past over cases similar to those currently submitted, but which the written law could not have foreseen in their singularity. Judges are invited to consult jurisprudence for inspiration but they remain free to contradict it. The closer a legal system comes to common law and the less it depends on the written code, the more important jurisprudence becomes. The history of art—and even more, the history of the avant-garde, namely the history of modern art— resembles such a judicial system. Artistic culture transmits art just as jurisprudence passes along judgment: by rejudging.[6]

In the fourth and final part of his science fiction tale, De Duve has his alien "Land Upon A Theory of Art And Get Ready to Leave The Planet Modernity." In this section, he reintroduces the problem of theory, which, he argues, necessarily diverges from both feeling and criticism. His theoretical argument has two components, the first based on a theory of proper names derived from Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* and the second based on Michel Foucault's conception of "archeology" as a mode of writing history. "Art," in De Duve's view, functions more like a proper name than as a term designating an idea or concept. He links this view of art as proper name back to the problem of singular judgements, finding in these the conditions in which the proper name "art" receives its "baptism" and has its reference fixed to particular objects. This proper name can refer to the dissentient feelings called up by an object precisely because "art" encompasses no definite meaning and can be brought to bear in a variety of contexts of use. "What matters," De Duve writes, "is that the word 'art' expresses a feeling, or set of feelings, but that it does not mean what it expresses. In fact, it means nothing, or too many things all at once, which amounts to the same thing" (59). The designation of an object or event as art does not subsume it under the concept "art," but compares this instance to

---

[6] De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 38.

previous instances in which this same act of baptism as "art" was performed. "In calling this thing art, you are not giving out its meaning; you are relating it to everything else you call art," De Duve concludes (59).[7]

The concept of archeology is employed by De Duve to lend this nominalist view of art a historical framework and to avoid the inconsistency of taking this nominalism as a concept or essence of art. As De Duve argues, "'Art is a proper name' is a conceptual or theoretical definition of art. 'Art was a proper name,' on the other hand, is not a definition of art at all, but rather the beginning of an archeological description of the tradition regulated by the idea of art as proper name. The tradition, congruent with the history of the avant-garde, is modernity."[8] Archeology, as De Duve uses it, is loosely based on Michel Foucault's methodological summa of his early historical investigations, *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Attempting a definition of this method of historical writing is the aim of Foucault's entire book, and given its proliferating complexities and not un-numerous confusions, a neat summary is not a simple matter. However, Foucault comes closest to delineating the distinctive aspects of his archeological method in contrasting it to the "history of ideas" in four fundamental domains.

Archeology, he claims: 1) relinquishes the hierarchy of value between earlier (original) and later (derivative) instances of a statement, seeking only to identify patterns of regularity ("attribution of innovation"); 2) it does not seek to resolve contradictions into a larger meaningful whole, but examines multiple "spaces of dissension" ("analysis of contradictions"); 3) it divides and individualizes discourses by comparing statements across registers, domains, and time periods ("comparative descriptions"); and 4) it conceives of change as discontinuous transformation and preservation within a non-homogeneous set of spaces ("the mapping of transformations").[9] Prior to his more detailed examination of these

---

[7] See also Theodor W. Adorno's discussion of nominalism in modern art in *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 199-225.

[8] De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 75.

[9] Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan-Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 138ff.

domains in successive chapters, he also notes a few additional principles of archeology. Archeology, he writes, considers discourse not as a document to be interpreted, as a sign or symptom of something else, but rather as a monument that occupies "its own volume." It attempts to account for the specificity and individuality of discourses, not their emergence from a vague and continuous background. It does not focus on the creative subject, but on rules and networks of relations. And its intention is not to restore the past—recapturing "what was really thought and felt"—but rather to describe, rewrite, and transform it. "It is nothing more than a rewriting," he concludes—"that is, in the preserved form of exteriority, a regulated transformation of what has already been written."[10] Foucault's emphasis on transformative rewriting allows De Duve to connect the historiographic concept of archeology with the artistic idea of the readymade, which, I have argued, is likewise involved in a projective transformation of signs and statements.

De Duve suggests that the modem European claim of art to be autonomous rests, first, on the deployment of the proper name "art" and, second, the confusion of this name with a concept of art. It was this confusion that made art appear to have a philosophical vocation, and now, from the exterior, "extraterrestial" perspective of the archeologist, that vocation can be seen as an historically contingent rather than ontologically essential characteristic of art as was claimed by the thoroughly modern discipline of aesthetics. It is at the point that this historical contingency is recognized that works of modern art can be treated "archeologically": not as "documents"—of psychological states, biographical events, social forces, or whatever—to be interpreted, but rather as "monuments" that occupy their own volume within historical processes of preservation, accumulation, and transformation. "The mistake thanks to which modern art, imagining itself as enacted philosophy, came into being is no more than a historical fact to be reinterpreted as such," De Duve writes. "This is a task for the archeologist, and probably no longer one for the artist or the critic. With this task, modernity is brought to a close and yields a new injunction: that of the postmodern."[11] De Duve does distinguish works of plastic art from Foucault's "statements" insofar as such artworks, in his view, are not "discursive" but

---

[10] Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, 138-140.

[11] De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 79.

"ostensive." However, he suggests, "the same reduction to which Foucault submitted signs, propositions, or discursive acts in general, anchoring them solely to the conditions of emergence that make them exist as statements, also allows us to relate images or objects to those conditions so long as we transpose them into the enunciative paradigm, that is, […] into a statement […] of the type 'here is…' or 'this is…'" (387). In other words, as archaeologists we can treat artworks as analogous to Foucault's discursive "statements" by asking under what conditions it became possible to nominate this object or event as a work of art.

In Marcel Duchamp's paradigmatic readymade *Fountain*, moreover, De Duve sees the exemplary work of this transitional moment from modernity to postmodernity—an interim in which, still within the horizon of the European modern, we begin to see modernity as a historically contingent fact, a body of statements and monuments to be rewritten archeologically. In several chapters of *Kant After Duchamp*, De Duve returns to the written statements of his own research into Duchamp and his legacy, especially his books *Pictorial Nominalism* and *Cousus de fil d'or*: *Beuys, Warhol, Klein, Duchamp*. Interspersed with more theoretically oriented chapters are a series of individual historical arguments about the "R. Mutt affair" (Duchamp's withdrawal of the readymade *Fountain* from the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists); the relation of abstract colorism to Duchamp's recognition of the paint tube as a "readymade" painting; the dividing line modernist criticism established between monochrome painting and the unpainted canvas; and the misunderstandings of Duchamp by conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth. It is a sprawling work, with many different threads and arguments, not all of them equally cogent. But I wish to focus in on two ways in which De Duve moves from his arguments about nominalism, judgment, and archeology to more general postulates about politics and ethics in postmodernity: 1) his recasting of the notion of tradition, and 2) his argument for a different alignment of art with emancipation.

Referring directly to the implications of Duchamp's readymades for the history of art, De Duve reconsiders what tradition might mean from an archeological perspective. The question is especially charged, because the tradition to which he refers is precisely that legacy of violent liquidation of tradition that characterized the European avant-gardes. De Duve points out that one of the characteristic

features of the history of modem art that extends from Courbet to Duchamp is the devaluation of the noble, privileged object and the advent of the “anythingwhatever”; Dadaism further deepened this tendency with its negativity and embrance of non-art. It is Duchamp, however, that in De Duve’s view extended the whatever to the status of a “categorical imperative” for the modern artist:

> Anesthesia, visual indifference, better, the freedom of indifference, specify the maxim of the choice of a readymade. However, it is not yet by virtue of the maxim, of indifference as a subjective attitude, that we must say that the readymade amounts to absolutely anything whatever. […] What forces us to say that the readymade (not the urinal) amounts to the absolute whatever is that through the maxim according to which Duchamp chose the urinal, according to which he judged, he was able—and with him the uninitiated spectator whose judgement he anticipated—to will that the whatever become at once a universal law: art, what one universally calls art, must be whatever and named as art by whomever. This is the modern imperative stripped bare. (357)

Yet this opening of art to the “absolute whatever” is not the reign of indifference, but rather a calling of the corpus of modern art into the jurisprudential realm of judgment and disputation. In fact, as De Duve suggests, Duchamp’s gesture potentially represents a new, postmodern realignment of art and politics, insofar as it evades the utopian error of seeing art as an idea to be implemented, a misrecognition of art’s nominal status that helped justify the authoritarianism, adventurism, and violence that too often characterized the politics of modernist artists.[12] Tradition, from this point of view, is similarly neither a heritage of value to be preserved nor something to be eschatologically annulled. The

[12] I have been influenced by De Duve’s argument in my *Singular Examples: Artistic Politics and the Neo-Avant-Garde*, in which I suggest that we can see a certain historical consciousness and formal reflection of this dilemma in the work of second wave, “neo-”avant-gardists after World War II, especially in the United States. This neo-avant-garde generation, I argue, tended to eschew stronger, direct ideological and political identification of their work in favor of a more open-ended exemplification, in singular works, of alternative ways of being, feeling, and associating with others.

tradition that Duchamp opens for the postmodern, archeological gaze is a "tradition of the whatever," made up of singular transmissions and judgments:

> This history or this tradition is transmitted from one artist to another, from one art movement to another, from one historical moment to another, and from one work to another as judgments are transmitted, that is, through judgment: as rejudged prejudices retrospectively constituting a jurisprudential record. The history of the modern avant-gardes, now that their violence is "recuperated" by and in the discourse of historians and now that the conflicts having propelled it all have become historical objects, reveals itself to have been much less war-like than juridical.[13]

Tradition becomes here a double object. It is at once the violence of the history of the avant-gardes and the "jurisprudential record" that makes modern art account for its violence. As an historical object, its passage into the present time of judgment and rewriting disarms it, revealing its questionable utopian politics to have derived from the temptation to carry dispute beyond the juridical realm into the realm of direct social force. Yet the relation to tradition outlined here can be applied more generally as a step towards a postmodern society. Modern politics typically grounded social identity in ontological categories of class, race, and national origin that were expressed by and preserved in tradition. De Duve's archeological-juridical view of tradition, in contrast, abandons claims of essential identities in favor of nominal ascriptions and singular judgments. This model multiplies points of dissension and dispute, while rethinking tradition as a contingent body of judgments that may be appealed to in "rejudging" rather than as a cultural repository expressing some essential characteristic of a group.

In the last section of the book, De Duve notes that within the framework of modernism, art was seen to possess a critical function insofar as it could be aligned with the project of the emancipation of humankind. Advanced art meant art that was "progressive," "announcing, preparing, provoking, or accompanying ethical liberation or revolution" (431). This assumption made the relations between ethics and aesthetics commutable, allowing a new artistic technique to presage a new horizon of existence, as well as legitimating the artist's adherence to political projects ranging from fascist activism to radical communism in the

[13] De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 364.

name of his or her art. De Duve suggests that just as with the distinction between the idea of art and the name of art, which modernity had blurred together in the name of artistic autonomy, so too a confusion reigns here between two versions of "emancipation": emancipation as project and emancipation as maxim. Emancipation, he notes, has a precise sense in Kant. An emancipated humanity is not one that has already achieved the enlightened state of maturity, but rather one which has been allowed to anticipate this condition as part of the educative process that may realize enlightenment. It is a premature granting of autonomy as if humankind were enlightened. Avant-gardes, however, both political and artistic ones, confound the distinction between the project of emancipation and its maxim (the "as if"), seeking to bring about a reshaping of those who have not yet achieved the desired condition of readiness in the name of that project itself. "Terror," De Duve writes, "is the ineluctible consequence of an ideology of the avant-garde that confounds emancipation as a maxim and emancipation as a project" (442).

Observing this distinction between the maxim and the project of emancipation, De Duve argues that the "critical function of art" must also be rethought in a new way that breaks the commutability of aesthetics and ethics. "What is it that the critical function of aesthetic or artistic activity watches over?" De Duve asks.

> It watches over the requirement of universality which in its own sphere—the aesthetic-reminds us that the same requirement should regulate ethical action in its sphere. And it warrants a passage from the aesthetic to the ethical, a passage, however, which is not transitive and ideological but rather reflexive and analogical. (446)

In other words, art can affect ethical action, but not by providing a representational model or by agitating directly as an agent of action and change. It relates to ethics "reflexively and analogically," through its effects on a viewing or reading subject, who is able to view the sphere of ethics in light of his or her experience in the aesthetic domain.

De Duve's formulation of art's critical function represents a substantial weakening of the classical avant-garde's claims for art to ethical and political efficacy. Indeed, in his archaeological recovery of the avant-garde under the sign

of Duchamp's readymade, De Duve explicitly calls for weakening—though not severance—of the relation of art both to tradition and to emancipation. Gone is the heady utopianism of the militant avant-garde, in favour of a cooler, more sober, but less ambitious labour. Not to change the world radically, nor transfigure life; but only to hold open the potential for new kinds of knowledge, experience, communication. Tradition is no longer conceived by De Duve as heritage or dead weight to be demolished, but as "jurisprudential record," to be returned to and reinterpreted causuistically. Emancipation "after Duchamp" appears resolutely "only a maxim," not a programme. It is permanently consigned to the subjective "as if," where, De Duve suggests, it is not without its effects; but it no longer coincides with one of the historical avant-garde's various ideological projects, to be realized by any means necessary.

Michel de Certeau: From Mystic Wounding to the Bachelor Machine

In 1975, the historian and cultural theorist Michel de Certeau contributed an essay to an updated edition of Michel Carrouges's celebrated literary anthology from the early 1950s, *Les machines célibataires* ("bachelor machines," a term derived from Duchamp's famous work *Large Glass (The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*). This new edition was the catalogue of an exhibition organized by Harald Szeemann in Berne, Switzerland, and it included discussion and examples not only of Carrouges's literary "bachelors," but also artistic instances such as Duchamp's and Tinguely's pseudo-machines; machines for disciplining or chastizing the body in pedagogy, gymnastics, and masochistic sexual practices; and symbolic machines related to psychopathologies such as Daniel Paul Schreber's famous paranoid delusions recounted in *Memoirs of my Nervous Illness* (1900) and in Sigmund Freud's case study about Schreber, "Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)," which appeared in 1911, almost exactly contemporary with Duchamp's first readymades. Entitled in the original French text "The Arts of Dying: Anti-Mystic Writing," De Certeau's essay sets up a framework in which to discuss key works of European literature and art of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries—Alfred Jarry, Raymond Roussel, Marcel Duchamp, and Franz Kafka—in relation to the mystical writings of seventeenth-century Europe

to which De Certeau devoted much of his attention as an historian.[14] De Certeau's extensive writings on mysticism consider mystical discourse as inaugurating the modern European relation to desire. Mysticism, he argues, gave rise to a textual institution that allowed a speechless, passional interiority to be read and interpreted. It entailed a new relation to the body as a space in which affective signs from within can be expressed, and this relation is mediated through sexual difference, especially through the coming-to-speech of feminine eroticism within a masculine discourse of power. In viewing a corpus of European modernist writings and artworks as "anti-mystic," De Certeau is at once arguing for the pertinence of the model of mystic discourse for understanding these works and tracing out a sort of "dialectic of mysticism," in which mysticism's hermeneutic procedures for eliciting meaning from desire terminate in their own machinic double. Moreover, he suggests, if mysticism and the emergence of the modern European self are historically linked, then so too these late modern, anti-mystic writings offer a crucial historical index of the modern European self's "arts of dying"—revealing what, in the end, that self has become over three centuries of development.

Before discussing "The Arts of Dying," however, I will set out the context of this historical argument by briefly considering two other contemporaneous essays by De Certeau, "Mystic Speech" and "The Institution of Rot." In the former, De Certeau discusses the mystical discourse of the seventeenth century in both an historical and semiotic light. He interprets the "mystical invasion" of that century as an emphatically "modernist" phenomenon with respect to the traditional religious and social matrix from which it emerges. The ambivalent relation of mystical discourse to religious tradition, its registration of social crisis, and its innovations of form and address bear in De Certeau's account an evident likeness to the unconventional usages of modernist art and literature. In fact, as De Certeau makes explicit, the political, epistemological, and aesthetic concerns established by twentieth-century European modernism form the hermeneutic horizon against which a new reading of the seventeenth-century mystical writings has become possible. This revisionary appropriation of the

[14] Michel de Certeau, "The Arts of Dying: Celibatory Machines" in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other,* trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986), 156-67. See also De Certeau, *The Mystic Fable,* trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

corpus of mystical writings repeats, across a temporal interval (a "delay," to use another favorite Duchampian term), mysticism's earlier heterodox interpretation of traditional Christian thought. "We find," De Certeau writes—

> in the context of a degenerating tradition darkened by time, an effort to go beyond; and on the other hand, a progress from a cosmos of divine messages (or "mysteries") to be understood, to itinerant practices which trace in language the indeterminate path of a mode of writing: these two features characterize the modernity of the works which for over two centuries were called "mystic" by those who produced them and theorized about them. They suggest a way of entering those aging texts and surveying the movement of their modes of writing against the background of today's issues.[15]

Both mystic speech and modernist textuality represent attempts within modernity to recharge language with a meaning lost to it through the decay of tradition. In both cases, these forms of discourse employ an innovative ensemble of techniques to turn the "distress" of the subject, facing a fractured language from which meaning has evaporated, into the "expectation of dialogue"[16]; to transform poverty and lack into infinite desire, opening a site where the self fades and the "other" is solicited to speak. As De Certeau writes, mystical discourse "reconstructs, where the ontological relation between words and things has come undone, loci of social communication" (91).

At one point in his essay, De Certeau makes this association of mystical speech and modernism explicit. Not coincidentally, he looks to Duchamp's *Large Glass*, with its erotic machinery, elaborate verbal-visual projections, and paradoxes of space and dimensionality, as his point of comparison. De Certeau is discussing the purely positional nature of the "I" that characterizes the autobiographical literature of mysticism. The "I" in these works is, he argues, not itself a speaking entity, but rather an "organizing factor," "the empty place (empty of world) where the other speaks" (94). This speaking-through of the vanishing self by the

---

[15] De Certeau, "Mystic Speech" in *Heterologies*, 81.

[16] "All mystic texts are born of this 'trouble,' this distress in expectation of a dialogue." De Certeau, "Mystic Speech," 88.

other often requires generic literary figures such as the dreams that recurrently give space and site to the mystical dictation. "It is fiction," De Certeau writes, "a nothing that causes one to speak and write, but it is also something 'there is no point in fatiguing ourselves over by attempting to understand' or verify. It is not something true, it is only a thing of beauty (*hermosura*): 'a castle made of a single diamond or of very clear crystal.' Like Duchamp's 'glass,' it is a transparent, finite space that has no place of its own, yet includes 'many dwellings'" (94-5). Or to put it otherwise, the fictions that typically support the mystic's discourse are no more than transparent loci of delay through which a semiotic transposition from passion to text may occur. They constitute a rhetorical machinery through which the erotic intensities seizing the virginal daughter can give textual shape to the mystical bride.

In his essay "The Institution of Rot," De Certeau develops the association of mysticism and modernism (here represented by psychoanalytic discourse) in an analogous way, but with a different emphasis. He now stresses not so much the mechanisms of hailing the other to the place of speech, through, for example, the fiction of the dream, but rather the diremptive evacuation of the self upon which openness to another's speech is predicated. Both mysticism and analytic thought are in this view privative, actively depriving modern European culture—whether seventeenth-century or twentieth-century—of the representations upon which the self was centred:

> Mysticism operates as a process whereby the objects of meaning vanish, beginning with God himself; it is as though the function of mysticism were to bring a religious episteme to a close and erase itself at the same time, to produce the night of the subject while marking the twilight of culture. It seems to me, in the context of our own time, that analytic trajectories have a similar historical function; they labour to expose the defection of a culture by its ("bourgeois") representative, and through this diminishing of the signifying economy, they hollow out the place of an other that is the beyond of that which continues to support analytic critique.[17]

[17] De Certeau, "The Institution of Rot," in *Heterologies*, 37.

In other words, these two discourses, the mystical and the modernist, are both historical endgames that name the indwelling rottenness of the present self—premodern for mysticism, modern for modernism—as a way of "opening onto the indefinite probability of an other" (44).

Mysticism's "death drive," its incessant revelation of the self as "rotten," as "filth," puts the mystic and the modernist in disquieting proximity to the torturer, who has as his main goal to make the victim avow his nullity and abjection, against which the regime can assert its glory. De Certeau suggests that the structures of mystical desire, by which the self is actively eliminated to make way for the advent of another's speech, can be colonized by the power of the State, which comes to occupy the position of the sublime Other before which the self is nugatory. For both the mystic and the torturer, elaborate techniques of pain, wounding, and bodily deprivation are the means by which an implied interior depth (desire, the secret) is transformed into a premise for the violent destruction of the self. De Certeau implies that in this cunning dialectic of mysticism, set in motion with the advent of modernity, lies one of the fundamental mechanisms of modern state power, its use of bodily pain to compel its victims to avow their status as "filth."

De Certeau's essay for Carrouges's volume, in which Duchamp's work is a central exhibit, also focuses on this uncanny resemblance between mystic and modernist in their systematic employment of violence against both language and body. Yet here De Certeau emphasizes the temporal and hermeneutic gap between mystic discourse and its apparent recurrence in modernist form. If it is true that there is a resemblance between the mystic and the bachelor machines of twentieth-century literature and art, and if the bachelor machine represents a privileged point from which to read its mystical predecessor, nevertheless their relationship is antithetical. The bachelor machine deploys an "anti-mystical" writing, in two senses. First, historically, in Alfred Jarry's literary work or in Duchamp's art, it emerged as a blasphemous attack on the tendency "to locate the mystical in literature" or more simply to sacralize the artwork.[18] Yet its "anti-mystical" character is not exhausted in this aggressive desublimation of art; more profoundly, it also expresses itself in a derisive retracing and doubling of the

[18] De Certeau, "The Arts of Dying," in *Heterologies*, 159.

very mechanisms by which mystic speech elicited meaning from the cancellation of the self and the evisceration of the body. “Celibatory fictions,” De Certeau writes, “also pass back over the graphs of mystic language. In a kind of makeshift clock repair, they isolate these precious parts, disseminate them in another space, ‘set them going’ in backward motion (the Regression of the dream) and reverse their usage” (159).

De Certeau identifies a crucial shift in modernity that can be gauged by the gap between mystic speech and the modernist language of the bachelor machine. This shift can be characterized as the disappearance of truth as the horizon of the work of language and image, or as De Certeau puts it, the supplanting of the “semantic” labour of mystic speech by the “linguistic” functioning of the bachelor machine (and, we might add, the readymade as a quasi-linguistic operator). The presupposition by the mystics of a “semanticized universe” and a “referential vocabulary” allowed them to establish the negative as a space of meaning, an invisible point at which violence done to the body (torture, asceticism) and against language (paradox, tropic excess) converge to reveal a spiritual truth. Once the transcendental guarantee of meaning disappears, however, so too does the meaning of corporeal violence. As in Franz Kafka’s fictional penal colony, all those ingenious “harrows” that once inscribed the sacred word of judgment in the flesh of the condemned, latterly become no more than murderous hunks of punitive machinery, literal pieces of a state apparatus.

This hermeneutic operation linking wounding and tropological violence, moreover, required as its precondition a “denuding” of the body, its stripping bare to render it a readable surface on which stigmatic signs could exhibit themselves. The stripped body is thus both the surface of inscription, of wounding, and the support for the sign that can be read and authenticated by an authorized reader. As De Certeau notes, this signifying and hermeneutic machinery implied a very specific partitioning along lines of gender, in which the male exegete interpreted and appropriated an *écriture feminine*, an enigmatic writing mediated by the female’s convulsed and violated body and appearing in hieroglyphic marks on its surface. In the bachelor machine, in contrast, any appeal to an existing structure of truth is barred, and hence the rationale for taking bodily violence as a negative labor towards revelation is also called into question. In these works, at least, “there is nothing outside the text”; the text

stands in for and systematically disaggregates into machine-like parts that body which once felt pain and which, through pain's convulsion of its surfaces, revealed the truth concealed within the negative.

In his novel *Locus Solus*, for example, Raymond Roussel captures this difference between a "semantic" and a "linguistic" violence in the astounding episode in which the fleshless facial skin of the guillotined French revolutionary Danton, which floats in a tank of conducting fluid, is electroshocked into silently rehearsing his famous speeches, rendered in unsounded but mouthed words and violently histrionic expressions. Roussel's inventor-protagonist Canterel is the interpreter of this unsettling speech, a late-modern version of the mystical exegete:

> Canterel had accustomed his eyes to interpret the movements of the buccal muscles, and now as the words appeared, passing over the remains of the reat orator's lips, he revealed them to us. They were disjointed fragments of speech, full of vibrant patriotism. Stirring periods, once publicly uttered, surged pell-mell from the pigeon-holes of memory to be reproduced automatically on the lower part of the ruined mask. The intense twitching of the other facial muscles, likewise originating in the manifold recollections sent up from the depths of the past by certain climactic hours full of parliamentary activity, showed how expressive Danton's hideous snout must have been on the platform.[19]

Neither subject to real violence any longer nor able through his oratory to provoke it, Roussel's Danton has been irreversibly detoured into the structures of the signifier and its play of phonetic difference and similarity, where he discharges his energies in a purely textual, pseudo-narrative perturbation. A similar capture and displacement of bodily violence into the surface agitations of the signifier are notable in many of Duchamp's puns, but most succinctly in these two:

---

[19] Raymond Roussel, *Locus Solus*, trans. Rupert Copeland Cuningham (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 59-60. See also, on Roussel, Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth: the World of Raymond Roussel*, trans. Charles Ruas (New York: Continuum, 2007).

> Aiguiser l’oute (forme de torture). [Sharpened hearing (form of torture).][20]
>
> Étrangler l’étranger. [Strangle strangers.][21]

Duchamp’s bachelor machines, in De Certeau’s view, displace the referential scenario in which the male reader appropriates the institutionally granted authorization to capture and use the speech of the other, mediated through the writing of the female body in pain. Duchamp is not concerned to redress the wrongs done to women in this scenario, to grant significance and voice to the feminine. That would betray his anti-mystical stance, failing to recognize that this goal of lending speech to feminine silence was part of the signifying apparatus of mysticism in the first place. Rather, De Certeau suggests, he creates a work whose language is celibate, a masculine language without appropriative recourse to the feminine:

> The celibate of the machine, in effect, returns to the fundamental, structuring form of difference—sexuality—and refuses to exercise any masculine power of expressing the feminine in speech. A cutting refusal, made exactly at the time when the impossibility of becoming, through pain, the writing of an other (feminine) causes the ambitions formerly invested in death to flow back toward the erotic.[22]

Bachelor machines make cuts not *in* the body, but *between* bodies, producing and reproducing divisions between components, categories, and constitutive terms. As one of Duchamp’s punning nonsense phrases, inscribed on a disk and rotated in the film *Anemic Cinema*, had it: “Si je te donne un sou, me donneras-tu une paire de ciseaux?” [If I give you a sou, will you give me a pair of scissors?][23] This offer of exchange or of a gift may anticipate being answered “sharply,” with a cutting remark that leaves a division that did not exist before.

---

[20] Marcel Duchamp, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Da Capo, 1973), 113.

[21] Duchamp, *Writings*, 113.

[22] De Certeau, “The Arts of Dying” 166.

[23] Duchamp, *Writings*, 113.

Already at the beginning of this essay, with the example of the sharp and blunt razorblades from Duchamp's notes, I indicated Duchamp's interest in the potential to cut, the "cuttage" held in reserve by the blade, which is in turn a point of conjunction between the readymade object and the concept, as a means of imposing divisions and analytic separations where they were not apparent prior to the surgical act of mind.

Yet this non-reciprocity is embraced by Duchamp as supporting his aesthetics and erotics of language, which requires first and foremost the incision of the reader-exegete from the scene; it reads itself and other texts, but conceals itself in invisible dimensions of n-dimensional geometry and the surface play of sounds and letters. For De Certeau, it even suggests a model of ethics and politics, an anarchic practice of refusing the power of institutions over bodies and speech, of dissipating violence "anti-mystically":

> through the transformative delay of the writing-machine-body as a social site: the represented machine is not intended to work. However, it has the strange power of rearranging the practices of he who merely reads it; it alters our way of transforming texts by reading them, it modifies the field of culture within which it moves, becoming the instrument of our analyses. It leads to the discovery of other celibatory machines, other functionings of the celibatory machine.[24]

De Certeau's concludes at the point of indiscernibility between Duchamp's ascetic foregoing of interpretation to establish "celibatory machine" and his own heuristic liberation of the artwork from its merely artistic bounds, into a vast, unbounded field of semantic productivity. Here the modernist artwork can begin not only to exert its influence on aesthetic experience, but also to communicate itself—like an error replicated as it spreads across a structure—among scientific, religious, philosophical, ideological, and moral discourses. Duchamp, for De Certeau, is the paradoxical exemplum of the non-exemplary, to be imitated in the mode of the failure to imitate, because its very structure is auto-deviation. De Certeau's Duchamp is the singular inventor and operator of a dysfunctional machine that neither he or anyone else owns, but which proliferates its erratic

---

[24] De Certeau, "The Arts of Dying" 165.

rhythms unpredictably across boundaries and throughout the system, opening spaces of disruption and deviance where an unaccountable freedom may be believed to dwell.

Jean-François Lyotard: Duchamp's Postmodern Political Geometry

De Certeau's reading of Duchamp implicates his work within a signifying economy encompassing speech, bodies, gender, and institutional power, discovering in it a deconstructive restaging of the mystical speech that emerged as a notable index of European modernity in the seventeenth century. Though his interpretations implicitly include the readymades as well, he focuses primarily on the celibate eroticism of the *Large Glass* as a scene of stripping bare and reading that undoes the similar scenario that historically characterized the manifestation, transcription, and exegesis of mystic discourse. In his book *Duchamp's Trans/formers* [French original: *Les transformateurs Duchamp*], in contrast, Jean-François Lyotard concentrates on Duchamp's notebooks and his obsessive exploration of optical projection, non-Euclidian geometry, machines, and mathematical transformations. Lyotard's book collects four essays, each of which concentrates on a typical structural element of Duchamp's work: transformations, partitions, machinations, and hinges. He prefaces these essays with a fifth, "Incongruences," that spells out how the more detailed examinations of Duchamp's artworks and notebooks collected in Duchamp's *Trans/formers* relate to Lyotard's broader epistemological and political concerns.

Each of the four individual studies, interventions at various conferences and exhibitions, explores a different aspect of Duchamp's work as artistic research into incommensurability and unfolds the epistemological, interpretative, and political implications that follow from Duchamp's discoveries. As Lyotard writes:

> You'll see that the whole of Duchamp turns upon this academic question of indiscernables, which also bears the name "question of incongruents" in geometry. […] Later you'll discover in them a kind of stubbornness about making the study of Duchamp begin from that field of impossible superpositions, strange projections, special turning points, anamorphoses,

> incongruences, which provided material for the *Analysis situs*, for topology, that is, for a sort of reasoning about sizes that forbids itself the hypothesis (the facility) of their commensurability.[25]

One of the major "incommensurables," in fact, will be the relation between the artwork and politics, so that it would be a mistake to interpret a Duchamp work as a "model" that might be mimetically implemented in non-artistic domains (as one could, perhaps, see in an El Lissitzky Proun or a Moholy-Nagy construction a model for transforming architectural or urban space along utopian lines). Still, Lyotard's effort is to appropriate Duchamp's work philosophically and politically by a sort of reliteralizing practice of analogy, a Duchampian procedure of overlay, transposition, and projection. It is not the *congruence* of Duchamp's art and the social that interests Lyotard, but rather precisely the scandalous results of treating Duchamp inappropriately as a political thinker and bringing these incommensurable registers of thought paralogistically into a common conceptual space.

The first of the four studies, "Duchamp as a Transformer," was delivered at a conference on performance. Yet Lyotard reads Duchamp not as a *per*-former, but as a *trans*-former—indeed, as "several transformers" (37). These transformations have two basic modes. On the one hand, Duchamp sets up relations of semblance between entities in two incongruent spaces, for instance, establishing his photographed face as both his masculine biographical identity (Marcel Duchamp) and his feminine artistic avatar (Rrose Sélavy, Duchamp transvestited as a woman). On the other hand, he also moves, through a series of "hinge" procedures of metamorphoses, from one entity into another (for example, from the *Large Glass* to his final work *Étant donnés* [Given]), in which the point-by-point correspondences between the entities are effaced by manifest non-semblance. In the multiplicity of transformations that Duchamp employs, Lyotard discerns a more general orientation that moves beyond the object and representation into a Nietzschean practice of affirmative invention: "The *performer* is a complex *transformer*, a battery of metamorphosis machines. There is no art, because there are no objects. There are only transformations,

[25] Jean-François Lyotard, *Duchamp's Trans/formers*, trans. Ian McLeod (Venice, California: Lapis Press, 1990), 26.

redistributions of energy. The world is a multiplicity of apparatuses that transform units of energy into one another. Duchamp the transformer does not want to repeat the same effects. That is why he must be many of these apparatuses, and must metamorphosize himself continually" (36).

The final essay in the book, the long study entitled "Hinges," explores an analogous terrain, but concentrates on the structural points of transition and transformation between entities rather than the transforming agent of the artist. In particular, Lyotard closely examines the stages through which Duchamp transformed the abstract multi-dimensional geometries of the *Large Glass* into the illusionistic theater of *Étant donnés*, via a number of intermediate "boxes" in which the previous works were disassembled and gathered together. The hinge designates an operation of transforming one entity into another: "by 'general hinge,' we understand a set of approximate operations permitting the dismantling of a work, the *Glass*, and the reassembly of another, *Given*, starting from the elements of the first one. A hinge between two states" (125). Any such passage, however, is also implicated in the temporal logic of delay, of irreversibility, and of projection. So too, in Lyotard's account, the boxes and the various thought-experiments Duchamp called "approximations" serve to deflect the transition from the early to the late work from a linear path and to disseminate the transposition through a network of delays and anticipations: "The operations, intellectual, imaginative, and plastic, of the Boxes are situated prior to the production of the Glass; those of the Approximations—'purely' technical ones—assume a finished work that has already been set up at least once (hence, 'that can be dismantled'), and are thus placed later than its production. Our hinge would come to operate between the first hinge, which articulates the Notes on the *Glass*, and the second, which analyzes the last sculpture by means of the last instructions" (125-26).

In this delayed trajectory of Duchamp's self-transforming corpus, mutating stepwise from the extreme allegorical abstraction of the *Large Glass* to the hyperreal illusionism of *Étant donnés*, Lyotard sees Duchamp's affirmative engagement with mimetic representation hinged upon an ironic recognition of its complete contingency. It is one among many perspectival possibilities, a way of projecting appearance, just as the progressive reductions of the *Large Glass* from

four-dimensional figures down to two-dimensional schemas offered another, equally useful way. As Lyotard concludes:

> Duchamp understands that in working on the 2-dimensional projections, even of 4-dimensional objects, he does not at all emancipate himself from the critique of the senses that is the metaphysical obsession of the Platonic and Christian West—he continues it. If with *Given*, he affirms representation-narration in all its humoristic force (anaglyphic humor), it is not in order to denounce the illusions in the Cave, nor even the illusion of the Cave, but in order to say: that projection is not worse than another one, it is just as good, because there are only projections. (197)

In turn, however, Lyotard again draws this perspectival contingency into a Nietzschean *amor fati*, in which the present is the hinge-instant of the possible that may split any object or event into diverging alternatives, bringing forth the unanticipated. Returning to the transition from the earlier *Large Glass* to *Étant donnés*, Lyotard points to the hinge as the instant of unveiling that is never itself manifest: "That is, the laying bare: before it, the body is hidden from the gaze; after it, it is exposed to it. It is the instant of transformation or metamorphosis of this before into this after. It is graspable only as this limit. So: two 'solutions.' That of the *Glass*, where the gaze comes always too soon, because the event is 'late,' the corpus remaining to be stripped without end. With that of *Given*, it's the gaze that arrives too late, the laying bare is finished, there remains the nudity. Now makes a hinge between not yet and no longer" (198-99). And, Lyotard writes, this temporal logic is a general one pertaining to the structure of the "event," not just to Duchamp's artworks: "That goes without saying for any event, erotic, artistic, political" (199).

The other two essays, "Partitions" and "Machinations," more directly address these political implications broached in passing in "Duchamp as Transformer" and "Hinges." "Partitions" originated as Duchamp's contribution to the Bachelor Machines exhibition catalogue in which De Certeau's "Arts of Dying" essay also appeared. Like De Certeau, Lyotard also emphasizes that Duchamp's works deploy partitions or separations as a defining feature of their structure (for instance, between the upper "bride" and lower "bachelor" panels of the *Large Glass*, which also embody different systems of projection and perspectival

representation). Yet for Lyotard, these partitions are important as points at which forces can be captured, reversed, and turned to other uses—a function De Certeau remarks only at the passage from speaking body to the realm of the self-deforming text, but not as part of the internal functioning of the text-machine itself. Lyotard seeks to discover in Duchamp's partitional structures an alternative model of using "technique" (both instrumental procedure and machinic technology). This alternative model is a kind of technological sophism: a use of the machine as artifice, to reverse the lines of force so that the weak may, through cunning, overwhelm the strong. This technology faces nature not to take possession of it and dominate it, but to outwit it and to divert natural forces into "artificial" channels:

> The machine is then neither an instrument nor a weapon, but an artifice, which is and which is not coupled with nature: it is so coupled in that it does not work without capturing and exploiting natural forces; it is not so coupled in that it plays a trick on these forces, being itself less strong than they are, and making real this monstrosity: that the less strong should be stronger than what is stronger. (42)

This technical "trickery," furthermore, implies that there is no general technology—whether conceptual or industrial—but rather a situational and singular assembly of machines of capture and reversal: the rhetorical *techne* of the sophists extended into the realm of thought and artistic construction, rather than speech referred to a generalized truth. The partition is the basic element of these micro-machines. To build barriers and introduce divisions rather than dissolve them into an integrated totality is the task of the sophistic mechanic. In turn, the productiveness of sophistic technique is evaluated according to its effects, not justified against a standard of universal truth: "Sophistics requires a space-time of speech and of society, especially political speech and society, where the terror of the True or the False has no place, where one has no need of these criteria to justify what one says and does, where one judges things only by their effects" (48).

"Machinations" discovers in Duchamp's attack on the pretensions of vision to encompass knowledge and his deconstruction of "retinal art" an implicit anarchism that would shatter the political geometry of disciplined bodies that

Michel Foucault, for example, considered to be characteristic of modem social space. Lyotard quotes a note by Duchamp about the aggregation of bodies in the military "corps" and discusses his propensity to dissolve such collective entities into separate, singular atoms:

> Against compulsory military service:
> a "distance" of each member,
> from the heart and the other anatomical units;
> each soldier being already
> no longer able to put on a uniform, his
> heart feeding telephonically
> a distant arm, etc.
> Then, no more feeding; each "distant unit"
> being isolated.
> In the end a Regulation
> of regrets from one distant unit to another.[26]

Starting from the typical Dadaist or futurist imagery of a mechanically prostheticized body—the machine parts already keeping the uniform from fitting properly, since each body is now differently constructed, no longer "uniform"—Duchamp extends this mechanical separation to the army as a whole. A dissipative system of delays replaces the integrative structure of command: the isolated units are linked by "regrets," what one expresses when not able to attend a gathering or to meet with someone, or when an attempt fails to achieve its anticipated result. Lyotard goes on to comment:

> Not only does uniformity disappear, but so does identity; not only the assimilation of one soldier to another by an eye that composes them, but the integration of each soldier-corpuscle to himself. Once they are undone, the units cease to have to serve; they are not bodies, but packets of singularities, packets that come undone in their tum. It remains to establish between the grains of matter a "regulation" whose function cannot be to unite them, but must leave them in regrets: each connection of grain to grain must be misrecognizable, alien not only to a different

[26] Duchamp, quoted by Lyotard, *Duchamp's Trans/formers*, 77, 79.

> connection between other grains, but to a "previous" one between the "same" one.[27]

This passage, then, spells out in different terms that "space-time of speech and society" that Lyotard identified as the context of sophism's situational technology. Its four defining characteristics are 1) singularity (it is a dispersion of events in time and space), 2) asymmetry (it is partitioned into quanta of unequal force), 3) non-homogeneity (it cannot be treated according to a uniform principle of truth or rationality), and 4) non-perspicacity (it can only be grasped perspectively and, after various delays, through effects).

Far from being merely a philosopher's capriccio on his favorite artist's work or a casual grouping of occasional pieces, Duchamp's *Trans/formers* represents a culmination of Lyotard's political thinking from his anti-Stalinist socialist activism in the early 1960s with the Socialisme ou barbarie group (Socialism or Barbarism) through his post-May 1968 brew of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud in the idea of a "libidinal economy."[28] In his emphasis on the employment of rhetoric as a technology of social space—his appeal to sophistics against the logics of representation and political geometry—Lyotard also looks forward to his later writings on post-modernism, justice, and the "differend," which recast society as an agonistic texture of Wittgensteinian language-games.[29]

Already here, however, in his preface, Lyotard explicitly conceives of his essays on Duchamp as a contribution to a new politics that would shift the question of justice away from the democratic principle of equality of individuals "before the law" and into a political space of difference, situation, and singular judgment. Lyotard closes his essay by invoking Duchamp as the muse of this new thought of a politics and justice of "transformation" rather than conformation to the law:

---

[27] Lyotard, *Duchamp's Trans/formers*, 79.

[28] See Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993).

[29] See Jean-François Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); Lyotard, *The Differend*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

> But the discovery of incongruences and incommensurabilities, if it brings one back from the space of the geometrist to that of the citizen, obliges us to reconsider the most unconscious axioms of political thought and practice. If the citizens are not indiscernable, if they are, for instance, both symmetrical in relation to a point (the center, which is the law) and nevertheless non-superimposable on one another then your representation of political space is very embarrassed. And if you haven't despaired of your life on the pretext that all justice was lost when commensurability was lost, if you haven't gone running to hide your ignoble distress beneath the authority of a great signifier capable of restoring this geometry, if on the contrary you think, like Yours Truly, that it's the right moment to render this geometry totally invalid, to hasten its decay and to invent a topological justice, well then, you've already understood what a Philistine could be doing searching among the little notes and improvisations of Duchamp: materials, tools, and weapons for a politics of incommensurables.[30]

Lyotard pushes the artistic analogy to emancipation, identified by De Duve and radicalized by De Certeau, to the threshold of its fusion with political actuality. If Duchamp puts to artistic work a highly nominalistic definition of objects, spaces, and meanings, implying the promiscuous mutability of anything into anything else within the boundaries of his artistic worlds, Lyotard takes Duchamp's games and thought experiments as a paralogistic blueprint for a new form of anarchic political, social, and legal existence.

The Truths of Art: Duchamp with Albrecht Wellmer

In closing, I depart from the philosophical lineage of French post-structuralist thought to engage briefly with the work of the neo-Frankfurt School thinker, Albrecht Wellmer. Unlike with my previous examples, the encounter between Wellmer's thought and the implications of Duchamp is largely virtual, of my own staging, although Wellmer has written compellingly on other areas of modernist art and aesthetics, such as the music of John Cage and Helmut Lachenmann, and has given careful consideration to the potential dissolution of

[30] Lyotard, *Duchamp's Trans/formers*, 27-8.

the artwork in modernism, a problem that was crystalized by Duchamp and Cage among others. Wellmer's appropriateness for this conclusion, however, lies elsewhere. Having taken as his starting-point Theodor W. Adorno's strong connection, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, of art's validity with both conceptual truth and social emancipation, and having attempted to reconstruct these claims within a post-metaphysical philosophy influenced by Jürgen Habermas, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Wellmer offers us a useful perspective for gauging the philosophical and political extensions of Duchamp surveyed earlier.[31] In particular, he accounts at once for how it is possible in the first place for an important, innovative artwork—Duchamp's *Large Glass*, for example—to affect regimes of truth and experience, such as politics, beyond the specific domain of art; and he also clarifies the specific ways by which art may provoke extra-artistic effects and hence in this process delineates the limits of art's direct efficacy in the theoretical, political, or moral realms.

Wellmer starts from the everyday communicative competencies of both makers and receivers of artworks. They are, in this view, socialized individuals who have histories of participating in everyday practices of communication, both oral and written (and increasingly, televisual and digital); their everyday competencies include a range of functions, from pragmatic, instrumental uses to aesthetically, emotionally, and existentially expressive uses of language, images, performative acts, and other signs. Their multifaceted participation in everyday communication will have shaped, to a greater or lesser degree, their abilities to use discourse consciously and make deliberative judgments about the discourse of others. In the course of performing everyday communication, in particular, they will have become competent in making and evaluating discursive claims to "truth" in a number of different dimensions. These truth-dimensions include: the

---

[31] In what follows, I will be referring primarily to Albrecht Wellmer, "Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity" in Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991), 1-35. Other relevant sources include from Wellmer include: *Endgames: The Irreconciliable Nature of Modernity*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998); *Wie Worte Sinn machen: Aufsätze zur Sprachphilosophie* (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2007); and *Versuch über Musik und Sprache* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2009).

factual dimension of how a statement representing a state of affairs measures up against our experience of the state of affairs itself; the *expressive dimension* of a statement's "truthfulness" or authenticity in relation to a speaker's personal beliefs, feelings, and way of life; and *the dimension of moral, practical, and emotional "rightness"* of a statement with respect to a concrete situation of life, measured against a background of culturally shared or even universally human values and norms. Moreover, not only do they gain communicative competencies in performing and evaluating claims to truth in these different dimensions; even in the relatively loose contexts of everyday life, they may also have become aware of the potential for dissonance between these different dimensions of truth employed in discourse: what we know to be true factually may, for example, be repugnant to us morally or inadequate to our personal, existential sense of who we are. Finally, as part of their own personal and professional biographies, individuals may have succeeded in composing and integrating these different truth-dimensions into larger, more coherent wholes that are characteristic of their characters and lives. Everyday discourse, however, tends to shift sequentially between these dimensions and connect them at most in only loosely coordinated ways. It tolerates great margins for dissonance, bad faith, lack of awareness, and outright contradiction in the relations between these discursively embodied domains of truth.

In taking up the question of how art relates to these different dimensions of truth, Wellmer makes two specifications. First, he suggests, art does not so much literally represent truth as mobilize a *potential* for truth: "The truth content of works of art would then be the epitome of the potential effects of works of art that are *relevant* to the truth, or of their potential for *disclosing* truth."[32] This potential for truth in artworks is, however, related to a second specification: the claims to truth that artworks carry are related to their claims of aesthetic validity. To put it otherwise, only insofar as a work is aesthetically "right" does it realize its potential relevance to other sorts of truth; the aesthetically valid work allows us to focus on and evaluate some potential truth that previously was imperceptible, before being represented to us in a concentrated, specially framed experience of art. Wellmer goes on to suggest that insofar as art mediates its relation to truth through aesthetic validity, through its complex "rightness" as

[32] Wellmer, "Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation," 24.

composition, it is particularly suited to reveal the interactions and interferences of the different sorts of truth comprised in everyday communication: factual, moral, and expressive dimensions. As Wellmer writes:

> It transpires […] that art is *involved* in questions of truth in a peculiar and complex way: not only does art open up the experience of reality, and correct and expand it; it is also the case that aesthetic "validity" (i.e. the "rightness" of a work of art) *touches on* questions of truth, truthfulness, and moral and practical correctness in an intricate fashion without being attributable to any one of the three dimension of truth, or even to all three together. We might therefore suppose that the "truth of art" can only be defended, if at all, as a phenomenon of interference between the various dimensions of truth. (22-3)

To return more directly to Duchamp, Wellmer's characterization of the artwork's truth as a "phenomenon of the *interference* between the various dimensions of truth" (*emphasis mine*) seems especially felicitous: Duchamp's work is replete with literal and metaphorical doors, hinges, boxes, and apertures that open and close, disclose and foreclose at the same time. Duchamp's aesthetics of "delay" demanded his concerted exploration of the inner structure of objects, discourses, and apparatuses, in search of singular dispositions that would suspend and defer functioning, in order to make time for free thought, erotic pleasure, and fresh experience. Duchamp's playful, paradoxical art is thus not a means of rendering truth irrelevant, on the contrary; it is a means of relevantly disclosing truth's incompleteness, the impossibility of its total integration, and the inconsistencies that emerge when self-understood truths are called to account for their own "truthfulness," analogously to asking about the "cuttage" that resides among the range of sharp and blunt razor blades but is present in no single one.

What then of the stronger political claims made by De Certeau and especially Lyotard for Duchamp's art? We can say, on the one hand, that there is nothing illegitimate about their extending of Duchamp's thought into political and ideological discourse, regardless of the biographical or art-historical veracity of their arguments. By calling into question the coherence or completeness of the different dimensions of truth in our everyday conceptions, an individual's aesthetic experience may open out, without sharp boundaries being crossed,

from the interpretative frameworks of artistic discourse into the full range of discourses in which the individual is competent, and hence from provocative artistic experience into non-artistic domains as a mandate to think and act differently.

On the other hand, as Wellmer underscores, these potentials for truth are linked back to the primary experience of the work's aesthetic validity, its "rightness" as an instance of art. This suggests, then, that we should take care not to dissolve too quickly the tension between the artwork's relative "autonomy," which grounds the possibility of judgments about its aesthetic "rightness," and its potentially wide-ranging and transformative effects within extra-aesthetic discourses. Of the thinkers discussed in this essay, it is De Duve who, with Wellmer, most clearly understands this dialectic. For De Duve, the key problem is to grasp Duchamp's aesthetic validity together with his potential effect on the twentieth-century regimes of truth (ideological and political, even):

> I guess I am trying to make sense of a century of political disasters and artistic breakthroughs. To drill a hole in the wall and let the sun in. I guess I am trying to understand why Marcel Duchamp was such a great artist.[33]

[33] De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 462.