



Chaos as a Method. The Challenges Poised to Traditional Art by Marcel Duchamp's Urinal

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THE WORK OF ART AS ART DESTRUCTION

Casino Royal, 52 dead people. This tragic event occurred on September the 24th, 2011. In Monterrey, Mexico a group of gangsters broke into a casino and started a fire, causing the death of over sixty people. Back in those days, I was fascinated by the spectacle of the sinks where paint brushes are washed by the students of the Visual Arts Department at the University of Guanajuato. It seemed to me that the non volitional deployment of spots around the hole through which water is lost was pertained to conceptual aesthetics. In that device of disposal and transit, of disappearance, it was possible to trace a clear relationship with the works of Marcel Duchamps, Joseph Beuys and Robert Gober. These facts led me to think that, just as power is constructed where a body is destroyed, since criminal acts such as the one in Casino Royal call into question the notion of State (with a capital "S", in the Weberian sense the word, as it having the monopoly of violence in a given territory) contemporary or conceptual art seems to be built where traditional art is destroyed. This is not a new notion and we only have to go back a hundred years before Dadaism to trace its origins.

With *Let's Finish with this Shit Now (Ja, jetzt brechen wir hier dein Scheiss ab)* (1979), Joseph Beuys revealed one of the essential contradictions that has coexisted with conceptual art since its beginnings, the destruction of the artistic as artwork. Beuys's work consisted in the demolition of an art gallery whose wall debris was put into baskets and sent to the U.S. Exhibited as samples of Berlin's situation, these were titled *Coming from Berlin, the Latest by Coyote*. Interviewed by Brend Klüser, the artist remarked:

"That is why there is so much debris at the Feldham Gallery, as a parallel activity to the Guggenheim's exhibition, in such a way that people can see the latest *environment* I have created in parallel with my retrospective at the Guggenheim."

(Klüser, B., 2006, p.131).

What people beheld there was wall debris, when walls are the usual place where paintings are hung to be exhibited. Hence, this work represents an attack against the principle

founded some three hundred years ago which establishes art as that which is meant exclusively to be seen.

As yet another alleged manifestation of plastic arts (visual arts or fine arts) preponderance, it is expected that conceptual artwork be the product of a teaching/ learning process at the Superior Arts School. However, conceptual art understood as non-retinal art, anti-art or non-art (Allan Kaprow) attacks not only the formative aspects of the artist and its cannon normative aspects, searching to destroy the creator/author figure, but it also jeopardizes the instrumentality, technical dexterity and the principle of exhibition/ sacralization of the work of art at a museum or gallery. Despite this attack, conceptual art does not resign to exhibition and circulation at the consolidated exhibition rooms and art circuits. The present essay takes *Urinary*, by French artist Marcel Duchamps, who is considered the father of conceptual art, as a starting point for understanding it, with the purpose of deepening the comprehension of the crisis that unleashed the paradigmatic event which led us to consider chaos as a creative method.

ART OR ABSENCE? A TWIST IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTION

Ironically, due to the rejection of the members of the Independent Artists Society Organization Committee, Marcel Duchamp's *Urinary* asserted its right to presence. With this, he inaugurated one of the main aesthetic categories that would establish the course of art in the starting century, that is, non-presence, disappearance, subtraction. Forced to disappear when it should be exhibited, *Urinary* built a ghostly future for itself.

The latter, that happened approximately a hundred and forty years ago, had a seemingly crucial root. With *A Bladeless Knife whose Handle is Missing*, the German thinker and scientist George Christopher Lichtenberg sought to cause a cut in the ancestral function of art, namely, the production of presence. And he definitely achieved it: his words made disappear that which, in such an accurate and orderly way, they named: the blade, the handle, ultimately the knife itself. Thus, he turned language into an artifact, mainly a destructive artifact of



that which it sought to represent, undermining language's mirroring and descriptive functions. Art was called, as it may be understood, to cancelling the world instead of duplicating it. Yet another conspiratory act of a similar nature, was carried out in 1883 by Alphonse Allais, seventeen years before Duchamp's bravado, through a painting called *The Anemic Young Ladies' First Communion in the Snow*, a piece which consisted solely of a white Bristol cardboard rectangle. Fulfilling the aspirations of an incoherent proposal that belonged to a small group of artists who precluded Dadaism, Allais had given words the faculty of creating a painting without using any pictorial matter whatsoever. This was also about the disappearance of that which words, in their scrupulous order, named.

Tuesday, August 29th, 1912, five years before the vanishing of *Urinary*, was also a memorable date in the history of the artistic strategy of disappearance as artistic production. A week before this date on Monday, August 21st, Leonardo Da Vinci's *Gioconda* had gone missing from salon Carré at the Louvre Museum. Even though this is one of the most valuable pieces of all French museum heritage, the event remained unnoticed until the next day. A week later, on Tuesday, August 29th, the museum's gates, which had been closed for a week in order to facilitate the inquiries, were reopened letting an ecstatic crowd in. The visitors, whose number broke the established attendance records of the famous museum, went there to behold a painting's absence. Just as the magnetic nucleus of a power so far unknown, absence attracted a large number of people. It should be noted that the previous attendance record was related with the presence of several different artworks, while the absence of a single one of them had unleashed such tumult.

As it may be seen- or actually not seen, since this appears to have been the aspiration of these artistic events (non-artworks in a traditional sense)-art, which since its beginnings had appearance or presence as its main goal, had started to look for the opposite, disappearance and absence. Artworks after *Urinary* which confirm this new kind of aesthetics could be Kazimir Malevich's *White upon White* (1918), John Cage's *4'33"* (1952), Guy Debord's *Film without Images* (*Film sans images*) and *Wails in Sade's Favor*, (*Hurelements en faveur de Sade*) (1952) and Robert Rauschenberg's *Kooning Erased by Rauschenberg* (1953).

WHERE IS REALITY? FROM THE ORDER OF MIMESIS TO THE DISORDER OF SIMULACRUM

In his studies about simulacrum, Jean Baudrillard identifies the four phases of an image, which range from a total mimesis, going through denaturalized masking and absence masking up to simulacrum. These phases, which in a certain way explain the development of art, from primordial antiquity to the present moment, render the process of the image's liberation from its referent, and, in this sense, they imply the destruction of the real to the benefit of image production and

distribution technology. Just like the order of mimesis betrays an almost mirroring relationship between art and reality, as it is clear in the Buthades's myth represented by Joseph-Benoit Suvée in *Buthades or the Origins of Painting* (1791) and in *The Origins of Painting* by Giorgio Vasari (1573), simulacrum would mean destroying such a relationship.

In its first phase, an image becomes present in the order of the real through a process in which the production of an image, that is, the creation of an artwork, consists precisely in adjusting to this order, turning into its reflection. I will leave out of this analysis the two intermediate phases of the image because I am particularly interested in the simulacrum phase. What happens to an image during simulacrum? How can this be related to Duchamp's *Urinary*? The order of simulacrum would inexorably imply the disorder of the real. The latter statement could be useful to explore the impact that Duchamp's *Urinary* would have in the development of art during the 20th and 21st centuries.

Since it is a deforming mirror, the task corresponding to simulacrum will be that of mismatching the structure of the real, just like the task of mimesis was that of producing its effective copy, its reflection. Let us think about the neoclassic and realistic artists, who both aspired to a 20/20 vision. The source of simulacrum can be traced back to reality's morbid desire to go beyond itself, aim for which reality uses the artist. As a feminine being, reality demands a mirror, that is, the multiplication and regrouping of the signs that compose it. Religion, literature, art and technology, among other activities, all exist owing to this fact. Faithful to the logics of embellishment, reality craves to always look better, more beautiful, more incredible, more real and unreal than herself. Hyperreal reality, in Jean Baudrillard's words. This morbid desire, then, leads her to a perversion. When looking into the mirror of simulacrum, reality adjusts to this distorted image mismatching and deforming herself, becoming another one. Parting from simulacrum, we find ourselves in a disarmed, disorderly, deformed world. A world that will demand from the spectator a willingness to arm it all over again. As Didi Huberman, following Walter Benjamin, stated:

"Such are the powers of the image. Such is, moreover, its essential frailty. The power of collision where things and times are put together, collided, says Benjamin and torn apart by that same contact. The power of lightning, as if the lightning produced by that collision was the only possible light to make visible the authentic historicity of things. There is a frailty that lies within this refulgent apparition, since, once made visible, things are condemned to submerge again, almost immediately, into the darkness of their disappearance, or at least of their virtuality." (Didi-Huberman, G. 2008, p. 169.)

To Baudrillard, simulation does not correspond to a referent. It is no longer mimesis but a superior state of diabolic

representation where one can attest to the tearing up of the thread that traditionally joined the real to the represented.

Baudrillard calls this phenomenon hyperreality. It could also be referred to as unreal reality inasmuch as it eliminates every debt with the real. Inversion of the order of the mimetic process: the real is no longer the source but the product of simulacrum. Reality, an illusion which for a very long time was the input for the creative processes becomes a mere product. The death of God would have later given way to the death of the real and its subsequent animation as simulacrum.

As it is now well-known, after the huge scam of the Philippine government was uncovered in 1986, the Tasaday, an archaic tribe supposedly found in an island in the jungle in 1971, never existed. However, the scam was sustained for fifteen years long. Jean Baudrillard examines the fantastic findings and carries out a lucid reflection and analysis about them, placing an emphasis on the encounter between the researcher and his pure object, the tribe, reaching some brilliant conclusions about simulacrum which may as well pertain to the relationship between science and its object of study. His speculations may prove useful to understand the crisis of art with regards to its object, the work of art, since the beginning of the 20th century. A crisis that would start, as this essay contends, with Marcel Duchamp's *Urinary*.

THE SPIRAL OF SIMULACRUM: THE FUNCTION OF URINARY IN THE PROCESS OF CREATION OF A NEW KIND OF ART.

In the next quote by Baudrillard it would suffice to substitute the word "anthropologist" for "artist" and the word "ethnology" for "art" to understand the analogy that serves as a basis for this reflection:

"The initiative for this decision came from the anthropologists [artists] themselves who saw the Tasaday quickly decompose in their presence, as a mummy in the open air. For ethnology [art] to survive, its object must die. The object, so to speak, commits revenge for having been discovered by dying, and its death defies science who tries to apprehend it." (Baudrillard, Jean, 2002, p.20)

The vanishing of "*Urinary*" which resulted from the rejection of the members of the First Exhibition of U.S. Independent Artists Organization Committee, represented not only a defiance to art, but also the unparalleled possibility to help save a dying discipline. In physical terms, a work of art is not eternal: beyond its symbolic dimension it decomposes like a mummy in the open air. The work of an art restorer is to try and stop this corruption, but it is not only the art restorer who endeavors with this goal in mind. Art historians, art critics and aesthetes share the same ambition. Hindering the decay or dissolution of a work of art is the aim that keeps them working night and day; dreaming night and day, for there is a lot of dream appreciation in the work of all those who are summoned by an art piece.

According to Baudrillard, for science to live, its object must die. Paraphrasing him, one may venture the thought that, for art at the beginning of the 20th century to survive artworks had to die. Let us think of what had happened to painting, which, based upon a neoclassic aspiration, had been elevated to the most sublime rank, where beauty, truth, order and justice met. At this juncture, almost a hundred years of a well-deserved glory, came the incoherent insult that turned painting into a joke. What else could a piece of white cardboard called *The Anemic Young Ladies' First Communion in the Snow* (Alphonse Allais, 1883) or a piece of black cardboard called *Black Men Fight in a Basement at Night* (Paul Bilhaud, 1897) mean? Painting had been reduced to a set of words ingeniously ordered, it was no longer painting but a word game, poetry, as Duchamps understood it mostly since Raymond Roussel's *Impressions of Africa (Impressions d'Afrique)*. The rejection that *Urinary* had received from the Organization Committee, proved that even the most avant-garde wing of art was unwilling to take any more jokes, which could be interpreted as giving death to the dishonorable object. Ironically, this death would save art's life, which with this happening projected for itself, in the vertiginous sharp space of infralightness-that mysterious special corner where Duchamps hid and from which he brought out the strange objects that conformed his environment-its becoming as non-retinal art. Such death would instill life into the dead object when institutional legitimation could no longer offer that.

So that traditional art could survive, then, it was necessary for *Urinary*, that abject and despicable object in which no artistic faculty whatsoever was displayed, had to die. That is, it was not exhibited (since show and exhibition are life itself for traditional art). Very early, untimely death it was. Because of its abject nature, *Urinary* had a posthumous existence. The filth that surrounded it, like a swarm of flies, made the righteous individuals (the committee members, except for those who had agreed to participate in the Dadaist game) attempt its sterilization. Hiding the object, which had disappearance as an inevitable corollary, would not be enough to end with the infection that, without a warning, this artwork would trigger. Very early, untimely death. *Urinary* dies and its death becomes a challenge to art which, paradoxically, seeks to apprehend it, to reduce it, to destroy it.

Through such an act of rejection, art manages to save itself, founding a new kind of art: anti-art. Although traditional art obliterates anti-art to show its insignificance, this act of obliteration would give non-visual, non-retinal art its strength. The vanished object does not reappear. It capitalizes rejection acquiring its spectral nature from such denial.

Like Orpheus, says Baudrillard, "science always returns too soon to its object, and, like Eurydice the object goes back to hell" (Baudrillard, 2002, p.20). When traditional art goes back to its object in an attempt to exhaust it, to recover it,

to keep alive, its presence generating strategy, the former realizes that the latter has acquired a sinister, terrifying, ghostly existence. The object no longer needs an art gallery, nor the legitimation of art barons. Lost in itself, in a game initiated by its opponents, the object has projected itself to the vertiginous angular fold of infralightness, where it only asserts itself inasmuch as it is rejected, increasing the powers of rejection, only in an inverted sense. Regardless the multiple attempts to bring it back to presence, to recover it, to repeat it, with a bony, ghostly smile, the object projects itself ironically and sarcastically, displaying the new power it has inaugurated.

“Science [art] loses with this a precious capital [the work of art], but the object is safe, lost inside science, but intact in its (the object's) ‘virginity’. This is not a sacrifice (science never sacrifices itself, it has always preferred homicide), but a simulated sacrifice intended to preserve its principle of reality.” (Badrillard, J., 2002, p.20.

The loss of the artistic object constitutes the mythic foundational moment in which a kind of art, the traditional one, loses the work of art while another kind of art, the conceptual one, wins it over. Perverse balance that unbalances the economics of production, presentation and accumulation of the work of art. Whereas traditionally an art piece represented a profit to art, since that is where its capital lay, now its loss becomes the foundational moment of new art. In the case of the *Tasaday*, Baudrillard thinks that their disappearance (its suspension, a delay in the crystal coffin established by science) can be understood as a simulated sacrifice intended to preserve (science's) principle of reality. It is, as will be seen, a perfect alibi which seeks to turn

science into an eternal discipline like the object that sustains it. New art will no longer depend on an artwork which must be preserved. In its loss, decreed by omission, in its abysmal and furtive existence, *Urinal* remains safe from art. Having been liberated, it liberates new art which, since the end of the 19th, and the beginning of the 20th centuries, sought to extricate itself from the ankylosed, retinal art.

Urinal dies- out of rejection, out of suppression- and with its loss that art that decreed its death agonizes. But this agony has a limit. In order to save itself, to continue to exist, art projects another kind of art. In its agony, it incubates a form of art which will feed itself from that which cost it its life. New art, capable to see that which used to be impossible to see is an anti-art. Let us remember that the art criticism magazine that rendered an account of *Urinary's* vanishing is called *The Blind Man*. With this strategy, which emerged from the center of the artistic itself, that is, from the organizing committee and from a group of artists who were concerned with the development of modern art in America, art managed to withdraw itself from its object. It created an artwork whose appearance is disappearance, whose presence is loss projected towards an empty space in a vertiginous and terrifying perspective.

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