Ready-Mades and Contemporary Art

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Figure 1
Marcel Duchamp, *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1915 (studio photograph by Man Ray)



Figure 2
Marcel Duchamp,*Fountain*, 1917 (photograph: Alfred Stieglitz)

It could very well turn out that there is not a single ready-made in the narrow sense among the works of Duchamp. As is

reported by several articles of this magazine, Rhonda Shearer submitted strong evidence that Duchamp did not present any "real" ready-mades. According to Shearer the "ready-mades" are fakes, handmade imitations of the ready-made objects they pretend to be, or ordinary objects that were purposefully changed by Duchamp. The bicycle wheel wobbles, the snow-shovel with the title *In Advance of the Broken Arm* does not work and even the *Fountain* to all appearance is different from all urinals that Duchamp could have bought anywhere. Hector Obalk draws our attention to the fact that the existence of Duchampian ready-mades is questionable enough as it is [(2)] . Given Duchamp's definition of the ready-made, according to which a ready-made is something that becomes a work of art by the mere choice of the artist, many of the works of Duchamp are ruled out already. This holds namely for those which he called "corrected" or "assisted" ready-mades, et cetera. These "ready-mades" were *visibly* changed by Duchamp. Furthermore there should have been at least one case where Duchamp presented his ready-mades to an art-world public. Actually ready-mades *were* shown to the public. This is true even for the period when Duchamp dedicated himself to the ready-made. Only once, however, could two of them be found in a gallery, and they were still not placed in the showrooms. This underlines the relevance of the research of Shearer and the ASRL, and the authenticity of the ready-mades becomes questionable all the more.

The importance of this discovery is due to the fact that the concept of the ready-made became so eminent to art, in particular to art of the second half of the twentieth century. We cannot imagine the art of the last decades without this notion of the ready-made. This brings us to the question of whether we have to revise our valuation of the art of the past 50 years in light of the findings of Shearer. I would like to show that the artistic treatment of the ready-made is still valid, regardless of it resting on error.

With respect to *theory*, it is crucial to know if there are “real” Duchampian ready-mades or not. If the works of Duchamp fail to be positive evidence for “real” ready-mades, this puts a serious question mark to approaches that rest on the indiscernible-thesis. According to Danto the indiscernible-thesis says that there are or could be two objects indiscernible by perception and yet one of them is a work of art and the other is not. Duchamp apparently cannot serve as confirmation of this thesis any longer.

In the realm of *art*, on the other hand, things are more complicated. Art refers to its material as much as to social facts. Accordingly the way it refers to itself usually does not depend on whether there can be drawn true or false propositions from this reflection. It may be conceded, though, that the new insights into Duchamp could depreciate such projects which Duchamp anticipated unrecognised. The originality of any

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Figure 3
Sherrie Levine, *After Walker Evans*, 1979

strategy towards the fake

[(3)] is called into question. But even in this field recent aesthetic experiments are not yet obsolete. *After Walker Evans* by Sherrie Levine remains interesting, even though the artistic strategy of calculated faking and the discovery of

the fake as fake was used by Duchamp long before. For her project Levine took photographs from reproductions of photos from Walker Evans, and thus produced photos that were not pictures from physical objects, but from photos. By way of this procedure the photos achieve a *geistige* [(4)] dimension that lacks the objects but the photos still look like the ones taken of physical objects by Evans – apart from some details such as sharpness. The photographs from Evans aim at objectivity and at documentary evidence, whereas the photos of Levine receive their expressiveness through the slightest differences which reveal their nearly invisible subject.

Even more interesting, however, are just those cases where art refers to concepts that are more immediately related to the ready-made. The cycle *landscape* by Alexander Ginter may serve as illustration for that.

II.

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Figure 4
Alexander Ginter,
Landschaft (Provence),
1999 (installation view)

Ginter's starting point, the notion of "landscape," is so to speak the opposite of "ready-made." Trees, meadows and deer seem to be somewhat out-dated. In so far as they continue to make our houses pleasing, they become more a matter of decoration than a matter of art. Thus, if a contemporary artist nevertheless dedicates himself to landscapes, it does not provoke particular interest. Yet *Landscape* still deserves our attention inasmuch as it shows, through subtle allusions to aesthetical concepts, how art gains a vantage point which cannot be undermined by new art historical evidence.

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Figure 5
Alexander Ginter, *Landschaft*
(Yucatan), 1999(installaton view)

The cycle *Landscape* consists of two parts. The first one, the title of which is *Provence*, is a series of canvasses which for the time being do not look particularly interesting. The second one, *Yucatan*, is an installation consisting of photography plus a linear arrangement of mounds of earth. The paintings – probably landscapes – show in the upper thirds black silhouettes (possibly hills or mountains or in one case an arch or a bridge). The silhouettes are reduced forms which exhibit only a few characteristics, pictograms of landscapes, as it were. On the lower part of each painting there is an area of earthy colours, of brown, yellow, and beige. Closer examination reveals that these fields, that, except for a margin of some centimetres, take up the lower two thirds of the canvasses, don't consist of ordinary colours but of soil and sand applied to the white canvasses. Below each painting can be found a name: places in Provence in France. Apparently the paintings refer to their subject through their respective material. Yet one may reasonably doubt the authenticity of the material.

The installation, however, the arrangement beneath the small gallery of "landscapes," seems to take into account those doubts. Above a still of nine mounds of earth with rectangular base hangs a row of photographic prints. These photos offer themselves as authenticating the respective mounds. Seemingly

each photo shows a spot where the material of one of the mounds was taken from.

The ensemble gives the impression of being simple, even naïve. That is but a façade that conceals a cunning play with categories and expectations. Little by little we are drawn into this game. I will confine myself to an analysis of just some of the interesting points to show the subtlety of the work.

The overall theme of the cycle is “landscape.” What the cycle consists of, though, by no means are landscapes in a narrow sense, which is to say landscapes that refer mimetically to their subject. It’s rather the *concept* of pictorial reference that is analysed and cut up into its conceptual components, and it’s these components that are shown. At the top there is the reduced “form” and at the bottom there is the “material.” The relation of these paintings to their subject is a relation by way of methexis, of participation in the object to which they refer. The “truth” of these landscapes is the truth of “sense-certainty” about which Hegel says “we have to conduct […] receptive, that is we are to alter nothing in it [the object, the thing], as it presents itself.” Sense-certainty “immediately appears to be the richest kind of knowledge” and at the same time “the most abstract and poorest” [(5)] . Each of the micro-landscapes that is hidden in the earthen areas has a complex structure, and at the same time is almost monotonous, so that from a distance the pictures look alike. These “landscapes” deal with the genre “landscape” in that they take from the “concrete” landscape the most concrete but do not paint it but stick it on.

The concept which is hypostatized here is the landscape as ready-made, as ready-found soil. The procedure reminds us of Picasso who stuck the label of a Suzet bottle on a canvas as polemic against the realism of the

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Figure 6
Gerhard Richter, *Atlas*
, 1962-1996 tallaton
view,detail of a total
of 633 panels)

Academy. The landscape as ready-made is then made radical through the fact that the "stuck on" stuff, unlike the Suzet label, cannot even guarantee its own authenticity. For the series *Provence* the black silhouettes take over this function in a way, and the photos appear to have the same function for the installation. That the photos supplement the mounds of earth and not vice-versa is made clear through the relation to the *Provence* "landscapes." Although photography is the genuine medium of landscape, it is replaced here by earth, the actual matter of the cycle, and serves as mere commentary. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the ensemble of photos aims more at constituting to an object. This handling of photography thus resembles the photo-installation *Atlas* of Gerhard Richter that was seen at the *documenta X*.

In spite of the impression we have for the moment, the key to the interpretation of landscape must surely be that the arrangement undermines the strategy of authentication. The expectation that each photo corresponds to one mound of earth is wrong, because there really are nine mounds but ten photos. This raises the question whether we still have any reason to think that the mounds stem from the places that are revealed by the photos. On the other hand one might reasonably suppose

that, even if there was the same number of photos and mounds, this does not prove anything.

As for the origin of the material, we are put into a state of uncertainty. So it's not only the concept of landscape material and particularly the concept of authenticity.

III.

According to the above interpretation there can be no doubt that the concept of ready-made, an object that does not undergo any change for its use is essential for the *Landscape*, although *Landscape* cannot be *reduced*to this concept. Rather "ready-made" is used for an analysis of the notion of authenticity and the genre "landscape." This holds regardless of the fact that Ginter apparently did not intend to deal with Duchamp. What is particular with the cycle landscape is not the application of the Duchampian concept but the expression of *Landscape* that is *mediated* through this concept.

The conclusion which emerges from what is shown above is, indeed, that such ways of appropriation are not proven wrong or out-dated by the recent research in Duchamp. We have some concepts with respect to which there is nothing they refer or even contradict, such as the concepts of ether or trinity, but which nonetheless gave rise to interesting artistic and even scientific discoveries. Insofar as art has, however implicit, referred to such concepts, it is not depreciated by the fact that those concepts became irrelevant to us. It's the theories, not art, that have to be reconsidered if our concepts cease to be valid.

This still holds when art itself is engaged in theory. It would appear, then, that the research of the ASRL gives more reason to expect that the influence of Duchamp will continue rather than that the art of the art, however, must not be contented with carrying on as usual, even though the aestheticians are inclined just to do so.

Notes

Footnote Return 1. Some important ideas of the second part of this article I owe to Constanze Berwarth and Elsbeth Kneuper(see Michael Ensslen: *Kunst als Kultur der Gegenwart*, Heidelberg 2000). Of course I take responsibility for the text. For correcting the English text I want to thank Sarah Skinner Kilborne.

Footnote Return 2. Hektor Obalk, “The Unfindable Readymade“, Tout-Fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal 1, no. 2 Articles (May 2000).

Footnote Return 3. Stefan Römer recently published a comprehensive essay on the fake, Künstlerische Strategien des Fake.Kritik von Original und Fälschung, Köln 2001; See also Hillel Schwartz, The Culture of the Copy. Striking Likenesses, unreasonable Facsimiles, New York 1996.

Footnote Return 4. I must apologise for leaving the German expression without translation. I feel somewhat uneasy about the translation of “*geistige* dimension” with “*spiritual* dimension,” though this may probably be the best one.

Footnote Return 5. G.W.F. Hegel, Phänomenologie des Geistes (Hamburg: Hrsg. Hans Jürgen Gawoll, 1986) 69, my translation.

Figs. 1, 2
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