

# Marcel Duchamp and the End of Taste: A Defense of Contemporary Art

Jean Clair, director of the Musée Picasso in Paris, and in recent years a fierce critic of *l'art contemporain*, was a major interpreter through the 1970s of the work of Marcel Duchamp. He organized the great Duchamp retrospective in 1975 – the inaugural exhibition at the Centre Pompidou – and he wrote a *catalogue raisonné* of Duchamp's work. Surprisingly, in light of this earlier dedication, he has come to hold that artist in large measure responsible for what he regards as the deplorable condition of contemporary art. He has recently collected his writings on Duchamp under the title *Marcel Duchamp et la fin de l'art*; <sup>(1)</sup> and it is clear from his denunciatory essay, "The Muses Decomposed," <sup>(2)</sup> that he closely identifies *la fin de l'art* with what he there describes as the *fin de siècle* art of the late twentieth century. It is marked, as Jean Clair sees it, by the ascendancy of a "new aesthetic category" made up of "repulsion, abjection, horror and disgust." Disgust is a "common trait, a family resemblance" of the art produced today "not only in America and Europe, but even in the countries of central Europe recently thrown open to western modernity." The French language permits a play on words between *goût* (taste) and *dégoût* (disgust) unavailable in English, which finds no such clear morphemic nexus between *taste* and *disgust*. It allows us to paraphrase Jean Clair's view of *la fin de l'art* as *the end of taste* – a state of affairs in which disgust now occupies the position antecedently occupied by taste. And this indeed, as Jean Clair sees it, expresses the sad decline of art over the past few centuries: "From taste ...we have passed on to disgust."

It is certainly true that taste, as a normative concept, was the governing category in the eighteenth century, when the discipline of aesthetics was established. Taste was centrally connected with the concept of pleasure, and pleasure itself was understood as a sensation subject to degrees of refinement. There were standards of taste, and a curriculum, in effect, of aesthetic education. Taste was not merely what this or that person preferred, all things being equal, but what any person whatever ought to prefer. What people do prefer differs from individual to individual – but what they ought to prefer is ideally a matter of universal consensus. Such was the position of Kant in his great *Critique of Judgment*, the crowning work of Enlightenment aesthetics. Kant argued that to claim that something is beautiful is not to predict that everyone else will so find it, but to assert that everyone ought to find it so. There is thus a degree of logical parity between moral and aesthetic judgments, since the former, too, entail universalization as a condition of validity.

Disgust, curiously, was noticed by Kant as a mode of ugliness resistant to the kind of pleasure which even the most displeasing things – “the Furies, diseases, the devastations of war”- are capable of causing when represented as beautiful by works of art. “That which excites *disgust [Ekel]*,” Kant writes, “cannot be represented in accordance with nature without destroying all aesthetic satisfaction.”<sup>(3)</sup> The representation of a disgusting thing or substance has on us the same effect that the presentation of a disgusting thing or substance would itself have. Since the purpose of art is taken to be the production of pleasure – what Duchamp would later describe as “retinal pleasure”- in the viewer, only the most perverse of artists would undertake to represent the disgusting, which cannot “in accordance with nature,” produce pleasure in normal viewers. There are, to be sure, those who derive a perverted pleasure in experiencing what the normal viewer finds disgusting: who have, one might say, “special

tastes.” The artists whom Jean Clair has in mind, however, would not have this special audience in view. Their aim is precisely to cause through their art sensations which, in Kant’s phrase, “we strive against with all our might.” Kant would have no recourse but to regard this, as Jean Clair in effect does, as the perversion of art. It would be of no value to the artists in question if a taste for the disgusting were to be normalized. It is essential to their aims that the disgusting remain disgusting, not that audiences learn to take pleasure in it, or find it somehow beautiful.

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*The Prince of the World*, Nuremberg,  
circa 1320~30



Andrea Mantegna, *Madonna and Child*,  
1506

It is difficult to know what art Kant might have had in mind by disgusting works of art, mainly because it is difficult to think of any actual examples that could have come his way. I

have seen some sculptures from Nuremberg from the late Gothic era, where a figure, which looks comely and strong from the front, is displayed in a state of wormy decay when seen from behind: the body is shown the way it would look decomposing in the grave<sup>(4)</sup>. Such sights explain why we actually bury the dead. It is intended thus to be seen as revolting by normal viewers, and there can be no question of what is the intended function of showing bodily decay with the skill of a Nuremberg stone carver. It is not to give the viewer pleasure. It is, rather, to disgust the viewer, and in so doing, to act as a *vanitas*<sup>(5)</sup>, reminding us through presentation that the flesh is corrupt, and its pleasures a distraction from our higher aspirations, namely to achieve everlasting blessedness and avoid eternal punishment. To show the human body as disgusting is certainly to violate good taste, but Christian artists were prepared to pay this price for what Christianity regards as our highest moral purpose. There is a magnificent piece of criticism by Roger Fry of a *Madonna and Child* by Mantegna. "The wizened face, the creased and crumpled flesh of a new born babe ... all the penalty, the humiliation, almost the squalor attendant upon being 'made flesh' are marked." I once commented upon this passage this way: "God will have to take on the appurtenances of gender and become the subject of pain in order to undergo the redemptive agonies the Christian narrative requires: as enfleshed, he must begin as helplessly as we all begin – hungry, wet, soiled, confused, colicky, crying, dribbling, babbling, drooling, and totally ependent."<sup>(6)</sup> With qualifications, and only rarely in the spirit of the Christian *vanitas*, the artists who have recourse to what Jean Clair stigmatizes as disgust today, do so in the interests of some higher moral purpose as well. They rarely concern themselves with the disgusting as such and for its own sake.

It shows the degree to which even Kant was a creature of his own cultural moment that the idea of art serving a purpose higher than the production of beauty does not figure in his

account. He is entirely satisfied with having shown a logical parallel between moral and aesthetic judgments, without so much as asking whether and in what degree the production of beauty itself serves or can serve some higher moral ends. It is quite as if beauty were its own end, justifying the practice of art through its existence alone. Kant never asks what the purpose of the disgusting might be in a work of art, or why the dereliction of beauty might be a moral means. So I assume he cannot have seen the sorts of works I have described – the iconoclasm that swept Protestant Europe in the sixteenth century perhaps robbed him of examples. Indeed, Kant can only see such images as might have remained as *decorations*. “We could add much to a building,” Kant writes, “which would immediately please the eye if only it were not to be a church.”<sup>(7)</sup> Its being a church in Koenigsburg set boundaries to ornamentation, as if ornament were inconsistent with the momentousness of the house of God, and God himself a minimalist.

There is, significantly, very little notice given to the disgusting in the history of aesthetics from Kant to Jean Clair. This shows that however bloody the history of Europe has been, most particularly in the Twentieth century, we remain very much men and women of the Enlightenment in our philosophies of art. Aesthetics itself has been regarded as part of what Santayana designates as the Genteel Tradition, in which the disgusting, because unmentionable, was unmentioned, and art was taken as logically incapable of giving offence: if it gave offense, it was after all not art. So art *itself* continued to conform to Enlightenment imperatives, dedicated to the production of beauty. What was initially so revolting to viewers of Modern Art, whenever it began, was that it itself gave offense, not that it represented offensive things. So far as subject-matter is concerned, Modernism was fairly conservative: it showed the faces, landscapes, still lifes, and figure studies – the girl at the window or standing in the garden – which had pretty much been the canon of *beaux arts*

motifs, once historical painting was downgraded from its pinnacle in the academic hierarchies, and artists became dependent more on sales than on

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Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863

commissions. It was in part for this reason that apologists for modernism felt confident that once the strange ways of showing these things was adjusted to, the new work – Cubist or Fauve or Futurist – would be found beautiful after all, as if the gratification of taste were the destiny of art, however revolutionary its means. In *The Guermantes Way*, Proust writes of the way “the unbridgeable gulf between what they considered a masterpiece by Ingres and what they supposed must for ever remain a ‘horror’ (Manet’s *Olympia*, for example) shrink until the two canvases seemed like twins.”<sup>(8)</sup>

It is only against the thesis that it is the purpose of art to gratify taste (*goût*) that an art aimed instead at arousing disgust (*dégoût*) will be considered at odds with itself. That thesis can hardly be said to have envisioned the *vanitas* sculptures I have described, the point of which was not at all to give pleasure, but to remind us to rectify our conduct before it is too late. Finding pleasure, whether in art or in anything else, would be a distraction from our Christian duty, and the beautiful body was a trap. But it was in part to ease the burden of that duty that Enlightenment attitudes existed, including the aesthetic attitude itself. So in artistic practice no less than in the philosophy of art, there is a fairly uninterrupted tradition, from Baumgarten through Santayana to the Bloomsbury Formalists, like Roger Fry and

Clive Bell, which connected art and taste, beauty and pleasure, in a tight conceptual package.

There were some important dissenters. Hegel, for example, was fairly dismissive of the concept of taste. "Taste is directed only to the external surface on which feelings play," he wrote. "So-called 'good taste' takes fright at all the deeper effects of art and is silent when externalities and incidentals vanish."<sup>(9)</sup> Moreover, Hegel considers art to have been, in its high moments, part of what he terms Absolute Spirit. Art becomes a matter of Absolute Spirit when, whatever other roles it may play, it offers, like religion and philosophy, "one way of bringing to our minds and expressing the *Divine*, the deepest interests of mankind and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit."<sup>(10)</sup>

It is fairly obvious that the *vanitas* carvings belong to art considered in this way, and so, I will argue, does much of the art to which Jean Clair addresses his philippic. It is true that in Hegel's view, art is a superceded moment of Absolute Spirit, and it is in this sense that Hegel famously pronounces the end of art. Its mission, in Hegel's system, is to be taken over by metaphysics. In a lesser way – which has entirely to do with the evocation of pleasure -Hegel concedes that art will continue to "intersperse with its pleasing forms everything from the war-paint of savages to the splendor of temples with all their riches of adornment."<sup>(11)</sup>

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“Veilchenschwank,” Neidhart-Frescoes (detail),  
ca. 1400, Tuchlauben, Vienna © Photo:  
Bundesdenkmalamt Wien, 2000

Disgust, of course, does not constitute a “pleasing form.” It would indeed be in bad taste to interject the disgusting in the name of art construed as pleasure. There is an amusing fresco in the Tuchlauben in Vienna, dating from about 1400, and part of a cycle which constitutes the first known secular paintings in Austria. It is based on a scene in the poetry of Neidhart von Reuental (1180-1240), in which the poet, seeing the first flower of Spring, covers it with his hat, and runs to bring his fine lady to see this lovely sight. He is observed by a peasant, however, who lifts up the hat, pulls down his breeches, and deposits a turd next to the flower, before covering it back up with the poet’s hat. Eek! We imagine poet and lady crying out, as everyone else laughs heartily, the way human beings after all do. When art played its higher role, however, the disgusting had a far deeper meaning than conjoining turd with tulip in a raw practical joke. Since pleasure had nothing to do with the case, bad taste was not part of the moral complex in question. It would only have been in its more frivolous dimension, as gratifying taste, that the disgusting would have been ruled out, though I can recall no specific mention of this in Hegel’s writing, but as we shall see, Hegel does see the disgusting as a central constituent of art in its highest calling.

The other exception to what one might think of as the mauve twilight of the reign of taste, is Nietzsche. Certainly there would have been no room in what he terms Apollinian art for the disgusting, but it is quite thinkable that what in our Apollonian moments we would reject as disgusting could have, perhaps must have figured in the intoxication and frenzy of Dionysiac art. Euripides’ *Bacchae* does not show someone being torn limb from limb – does not show the followers of Dionysus plunging their hands into blood and viscera. But, other than in sexual transport and wild dancing – other than in sex,



drugs, and rock-n'-roll – what, other than handling disgusting or forbidden substances, is likely to come up when our Apollinian defenses are down? Behavior is very likely to be regressive when we are in such states.

Richard Wollheim has brilliantly described the paintings of Willem de Kooning from the perspectives of regression:

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Willem de Kooning, *Untitled XX*, 1977

The sensations that de Kooning cultivates are, in more ways than one, the most fundamental in our repertoire. They are those sensations which give us our first access to the external world and they also, as they repeat themselves, bind us forever to the elementary forms of pleasure into which they initiated us. Both in the grounding of human knowledge and in the formation of human desire, they prove basic. De Kooning then crams his pictures with infantile experiences of sucking, touching, biting, excreting, retaining, smearing, sniffing, wallowing, gurgling, stroking, wetting.

And these pictures...contain a further reminder. They remind us that, in their earliest occurrence, these experiences invariably posed a threat. Heavily charged with excitation, they threaten to overwhelm the fragile barriers of the mind that contained them, and to swamp the immature, precarious

self.<sup>(12)</sup>

This catalog reminds us of how the fact of human embodiment is dramatized by Christian art by taking the condition of the human infant as primitive. It is that condition that someone steeped in the psycho-analytical theory of primal process, as Wollheim is, will construe as the default position of human awareness. The infant is Dionysiac, the adult is Apollonian. Jean Clair strikes the Apollonian pose when he describes the contemporary artist in terms strikingly consonant with the feelings which de Kooning incorporates in his art:

The contemporary artist resembles the unweaned infant who, unable as yet, in the early stages of development, to perceive the boundaries separating his body from that of his mother, seeks in the tactile and olfactory experience of his own excrement the frontiers that define his identity. With the raising of brute corporality to the status of a work of art, we would seem to have come full circle<sup>(13)</sup>.

As indeed we have, if we count de Kooning as at least a proto-contemporary artist. It is in any case difficult to see how de Kooning can escape what Jean Clair calls "the aesthetic of the dunghill." He certainly would not easily be thought to exemplify "an aesthetic of the delicate, the refined and the quintessential [that] marked that of the late nineteenth century." So the question is how it is that the Realm of Taste has come full circle, returning to what had been possible for it before the advent of Enlightenment aesthetics. Or, in Jean Clair's own words, "How did we arrive at this stage in our history, this era of disgust? When did it all begin, and what models were used?"<sup>(14)</sup>

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Piero Manzoni, *Artist's Shit*, May 1961



Joseph Beuys, *Fat Chair*, 1964



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917 © 2000 Succession

Marcel Duchamp, ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris

*Il catalogo e questo*, as Leporello says. "If we cast about for predecessors for this abject or repulsive or excremental art, examples of which present themselves in ever growing numbers to our eyes, there is no shortage of examples to choose from." He mentions various artists of varying degrees of stature, from Piero Manzoni, who presented *Merda d'artista* in cans, certainly as an avant-garde joke,<sup>(15)</sup> and Joseph Beuys, who used animal fat as a symbolic material in his art. It would have to be a very squeamish individual, and perhaps a vegetarian as well, who finds lard – or felt, which was Beuys's other signature substance – disgusting. For Beuys, these were

exemplars of nourishment and warmth, very powerful requirements of the fragile human body, brought to great awareness in the condition of deprivation countless many human beings sustained in the aftermath of the Second World War. Beuys claims that he himself had been covered with fat and wrapped with felt by Kurdish tribesmen when he was shot down as an aviator in that war, and restored bit by bit to health. That is hardly an avant garde joke. It is, by contrast, a creative expansion of the inventory of artist's materials in order to present as art something which conveys with a certain immediacy the kind of universal human meaning that qualifies it as falling under Absolute Spirit. It is, however, Marcel Duchamp whom Jean Clair regards as "*primus inter pares*." Duchamp, more than anyone else, insinuated the disgusting into the ontemporary artistic repertoire when he attempted to enter a urinal as a work of art into the Exhibition of Independent Artists in New York, in 1917. It was unmistakably a urinal, despite its having been signed and dated R.Mutt, 1917, and it has, far more than Manzoni's or even Beuys's works, attained a legendary stature in the annals of twentieth century art.

But as an example of the *disgusting*? This goes so against the grain of anyone but Jean Clair's idea of what is disgusting, and runs so counter to the way most of us in the artworld think of Duchamp's gesture, that we can understand how he should want to blame the artworld itself for having colluded in bringing art so low: "Museum directors, curators of large international gatherings, art-critics in reviews and magazines," Jean Clair writes, "apart from one or two timid attempts at resistance soon snuffed out in the pervading climate of conformity, an entire artistic establishment, from Venice to Paris, from Berlin to Los Angeles, favors and applauds this all-engulfing art of abjection."<sup>(16)</sup> I dare say that Jean Clair counts his own widely debated attacks on *l'art contemporain* as among the "timid attempts at resistance."

Now I want to say that a case *can* be made that Duchamp made it possible for artists today to use "abject" materials to

produce experiences in viewers of the kind that Beuys evidently believed could only be provoked by the actual use of fat and of felt. The case can only be made circuitously, however, and it cannot be thought to offer the slightest support for Jean Clair's condemnation of such art, or for his interpretation of what Duchamp achieved in his legendary failed effort to subvert the Society of Independent Artists by submitting a urinal, signed and titled, to its exhibition in 1917.<sup>(17)</sup> The artistic use of non-standard materials must certainly be traced back to Duchamp's ready-mades of 1915-1917, though I suppose it is part of the revolution Duchamp effected that the distinction between standard and non-standard materials has vanished from critical thought today. And so has the concept of taste vanished from critical assessment of works of art. These two achievements (or disasters, as they evidently appear to Jean Clair) are connected. Duchamp, I think single-handedly, demonstrated that it is entirely possible for something to be art without having anything to do with taste at all, good or bad. Thus he put an end to that period of aesthetic thought and practice which was concerned, to use a title of David Hume's, with the standard of taste. This does not mean that the era of taste (*goût*) has been succeeded by the era of disgust (*dégoût*). It means, rather, that the era of taste has been succeeded by the era of meaning. The question is not whether something is in good or bad taste, but what does it mean. It is true that Duchamp made it possible to use substances and forms that do or can induce disgust. That is now an option. But whether or not to exercise that option is entirely a matter of what meaning an artist means to convey. I might add that it is also an option, rather than an imperative, to induce pleasure of the kind associated with beauty. That too is a choice for artists for whom the use of beauty has a meaning. It was, it must be said, not an option Duchamp chose to exercise because he was engaged in the overthrow of taste as an artistic imperative. But disgust is too strong an affect to associate in any degree with Duchamp's

work, however off-color it may on occasion have been.

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Marcel Duchamp, *Comb*, 1916 © 2000  
Succession Marcel Duchamp, ARS,  
N.Y./ADAGP, Paris



Constantin Brancusi, *Princess X*, 1916

This overcoming of taste was the achievement of his readymades of 1915-1917, intended to exemplify the most radical dissociation of aesthetics from art. "A point which I very much want to establish is that the choice of these 'readymades' was never dictated by aesthetic delectation," Duchamp wrote, retrospectively in 1961. "The choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste...in fact a complete anesthesia."<sup>(18)</sup>

In 1924, Duchamp made it clear that finding an object with no aesthetic qualities was far from simple, but we can get a sense for his intention if we consider his *Comb* (1916) – a simple metal comb of the sort used by dog owners to groom their pets. No one can be said to have either good or bad taste in metal grooming combs! They exemplify the principle of the readymade through the fact that there is "no beauty, no ugliness, nothing particularly aesthetic about it," and from

this perspective one of them is as good as any other. We can see how little Duchamp's closest associates understood his agenda from the fact that Duchamp's patron, Walter Arensberg, imagined the artist's intent in submitting the urinal was to draw attention to "a lovely form," and to the formal parallels between this piece of industrial plumbing and the sculpture of Constantin Brancusi! It was no intention of Duchamp to have the urinal sublated under aesthetic perception, and appreciated as something after all beautiful- something to which we had heretofore been blind. "I threw ...the urinal in their faces as a challenge, and now they admire it for its aesthetic beauty."<sup>(19)</sup> Its beauty, if beauty there is, is neither here nor there. He was submitting it as a work of art, not something calculated to induce what he dismisses as "retinal flutters."<sup>(20)</sup>

It is no less a misunderstanding of Duchamp to say that the urinal was a kind of aesthetic Trojan horse, as Jean Clair in effect proposes, intended to insinuate disgust into the sphere of art in the guise of an unmistakable article of plumbing. For one thing, as we know, Duchamp was something of an enthusiast for American plumbing. But more important was his effort to get beyond the scope of taste in the production and appreciation of art. In an interview he gave in 1915, Duchamp declared that

The capitals of the Old World have labored for hundreds of years to find that which constitutes good taste and one may say that they have found the zenith thereof. But why do people not understand what a bore his is? ...If only America would realize that the art of Europe is finished – dead – and that America is the country of the art of the future...Look at the skyscrapers! Has Europe anything to show more beautiful than these? New York itself is a work of art, a complete work of art...

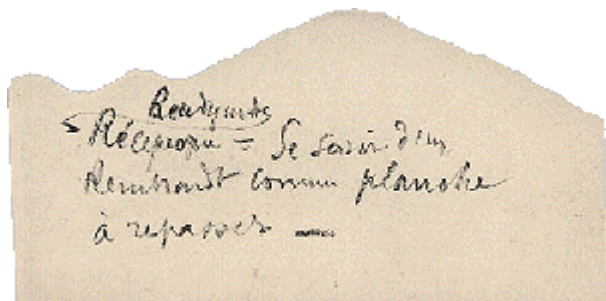
One aspect of the highly overdetermined gesture of submitting the urinal was to de-Europeanize American art – to get Americans to appreciate their own artistic achievement. But that meant that Americans had to be made to see that an article of plumbing as a work of art, but not necessarily as beautiful in the way works of art had standardly been seen. When the hanging committee refused to receive the work, it did so on the grounds that it was not art. My sense is that they would have rejected a sink or a bathtub, had Duchamp submitted these instead. But it is quite possible that one function of using a urinal was its association with the infantile excitement associated with elimination. The purpose was not to bring the disgusting into the site of art, but to displace taste as the criterion of art, and to use the association with bodily needs as a means. The disjunction between art and the appurtenances of elimination had been an established trope of French aesthetic thought since Theophile Gautier had written in his preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* that art can serve no end: “everything that is useful is ugly, for it is the expression of some need ...the most useful place in a house is the latrine.”<sup>(22)</sup>

It is striking how many of what we might call the classic ready-mades in their pre-transfigured identity are connected, as tools, to various human needs – drying bottles, clearing snow, getting the snarls out of a dog’s coat, etc. The urinal is a somewhat special readymade in virtue of its association with elimination and gender, which always played a role in Duchamp’s humor, and in his art. My sense is that in connecting it with the exalted category of art, Duchamp was executing an impish joke, more sophisticated than that of the peasant in the Tuchlauben fresco, but of the same genre. His aim, however, was not mere naughtiness. The joke was too intellectual by far for that. It was, as said, to raise to the level of consciousness the degree to which the aesthetics of taste had been allowed to define the essence of art. It was time for American artists to cut their conceptual dependence



on Europe, and affirm their true achievement as Americans. His effort was to reconnect art with life. And this has been part of his legacy to the avant garde.

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Marcel Duchamp, Note from the *Green Box*, 1934 © 2000 Succession

Marcel Duchamp, ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris

Jean Clair writes that the symbolic role of the urinal “is not to raise the status of a manufactured object to that of a work of art [but] to underwrite the archaic sacralization of human refuse and the infantile worship on one’s own dung.” That is not how the urinal inflected the direction of art in America. It, together with the ready-mades in general, underwrote the thesis that the useful could be art and that art could even be made useful by transforming it into a “reverse ready-made,” e.g., to use a painting by Rembrandt as an ironing board. After Duchamp, one could in principle make art out of anything. The era of turpentine and taste had come to an end. The era of finding a definition of art to replace the one based on aesthetic delectation had begun.

Art historians, including Jean Clair himself in his early and far more sympathetic text, *Marcel Duchamp: le grand fictive* (1974), will generally agree that the form the avant garde took after the Second World War, especially in America, was due to John Cage, in his seminar in composition at the New School. “I had taken steps,” Cage wrote, “to make a music that was just sounds, sounds free of judgments about whether they were ‘musical’ or not.”

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John Cage, 4' 33" (cover), 1960, reproduced with permission of Henmor Press, Inc. New York  
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Cunningham Dance Foundation, "Walkaround Time," 1968 ©  
Merce Cunningham Dance  
Foundation, Inc., NY, 2000

Since the theory of conventional music is a set of laws exclusively concerned with 'musical' sounds, having nothing to say about noises, it had been clear from the beginning that what was needed was a music based on noise, on noise's lawlessness. Having made such an anarchic music, we were able later to include in its performance even so-called musical sounds. The next steps were social, and they are still being taken. We need first of all a music in which not only are sounds just sounds, but in which people are just people, not subject, that is, to laws established by any one of them, even if he is 'the composer' or 'the conductor.' Finally we need a music which no longer prompts talk of audience participation, for in it the division between performers and audience no longer exists: a music made by everyone.

What's required is a music that requires no rehearsal.<sup>(23)</sup>

Cage's enfranchisement for musical purposes of sounds outside the restricted range of musical sounds opened up the need for a redefinition of music. A parallel effort to open up the full range of bodily movements as candidates for dance movements was carried forward by Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Yvonne Rainier, and the Judson Dance Group. The group of artists who identified themselves as Fluxus in the early 1960s were inspired, as composers, performers and visual artists, to dissolve utterly the barriers between art and life. But they were by no means the only ones, however distinctive their oeuvre.

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Claes Oldenburg, *Two Girls' Dresses*, 1961. © Collection Onnasch, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Germany

Closing the gap between art and life was a project shared by a number of movements, united by a common mistrust of the claims of high art, but differing, like sects of a new revelation, with reference to which sector of common reality to redeem. Pop refused to countenance a distinction between fine and commercial, or between high and low art. Minimalists made art out of industrial materials – plywood, plate glass, sections of prefabricated houses. Realists like George Segal and Claes Oldenburg were moved by how extraordinary the ordinary is: nothing an artist made could carry meanings more profound than those evoked by everyday garments, fast food, car parts,

street signs. Each of these efforts aimed at bringing art down to earth, and transfiguring, through artistic consciousness, what everyone already knows. From some time in the nineteenth century, prophets like John Ruskin and William Morris had condemned modern life, and pointed to some earlier historical moment as an ideal to which we must strive to return. The artists of the Fifties and Sixties were also prophets, reconciling men and women to the lives they already led and to the world in which they lived it. Perhaps all this was the artistic expression of the massive embrace of ordinary life after the massive dislocations of the Second World War. What could be more meaningful than building materials, canned goods, children's toys – or for the matter sparkling kitchens and bathrooms – the consumer goods against which the next generation was to turn with such vehemence?

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Andy Warhol, *Brillo Box*, 1968

Whatever the explanation, there was something in the air in those years. Though Duchamp had no impact to speak of on philosophy, some historical explanation has to be given of the fact that philosophers turned from the high-tech idiom of mathematical logic, and under the influence of Wittgenstein accepted ordinary language as perfectly suited to philosophical analysis. In my own early writing in the philosophy of art – “The Art World” of 1964<sup>(24)</sup> – I saw it as the task of aesthetics to show how to distinguish art works from real things when there was no visible or palpable difference between them, as in the case of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* and the commonplace cartons of the supermarket and the warehouse. But that question could hardly have been

imagined had there not been the avant-garde revolution based on and inspired by Duchamp. I take a special satisfaction in having brought his thought into the space of philosophy in the years in which what Jean Clair once acknowledged as Duchamp's héritage énorme<sup>(25)</sup> was most vividly felt by artists.

It is a consequence of that heritage that once it is accepted that anything can be or be part of a work of art, the way of course is open for even the most disgusting of substances to play an artistic role in the creation of meanings. But it was hardly in order to make use of transgressive materials possible that the avant garde embraced Duchamp's lesson, and Jean Clair, whatever his current aversions, must more than anyone be aware of this truth. In the 1975 publication which I have just cited, he compiled an admirable catalog of post-war movements that owe their agendas to Duchamp: Pop and Fluxus, but also *Nouveaux réalistes*, Op art, Conceptual art, Art & Language, etc etc. In that entire thirty years period, it is worth remarking that the abject makes no appearance, though there are, in the spirit of Duchampian play, erotic and even excremental references in Fluxus etc. Most of the art Jean Clair mentions is almost pure in its intellectuality. Duchamp was admired for his wit and his intelligence. He was always perceived as a kind of Monsieur Teste, with a taste for slightly naughty jokes.<sup>(26)</sup> His mood, far from abjection, was delight.

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Chris Ofili, *The Holy Virgin Mary*, 1996

Now there was, particularly in the early years of 1990s, a movement designated more by curators than by the artists themselves as *Abject Art*. It was scarcely as epidemic as Jean Clair pretends, nor has it been particularly central in giving form to contemporary art. But it did and to a degree does exist, and, in the oblique way I have indicated, it, like so much else, owes its possibility to Marcel Duchamp. It does so once again because he opened forever the boundaries between art and life, and hence between art and the abject, as also part of life. It is simply a matter of interpretative heavy breathing, however, to claim that the artists of abjection derived any part of their *content* from Duchamp. It is a characteristic of art historians to imagine that art can be explained only by art – that if artists should use the excremental in their art, that must be explained with reference to earlier artists who did so. There are explanations of art that have nothing to do with prior art. There is no interesting narrative that will take us from the Tuchlauben scatologist, through Duchamp, to Chris Ofili, whose use of elephant dung was the occasion of the mayor of New York's censorious response to the *Sensation* exhibition in New York. What explains the recourse to abjection has entirely to do with the politics of the human body as this surfaced in

the art centers of the world in the decade in which abjection became thematized. What Duchamp can be held accountable for, if accountability is the appropriate concept, is having made it artistically legitimate to have recourse to the substances through which certain artists found it suitable to urge their concerns.

“The abject,” writes the art historian Joseph Koerner, “is a novelty neither in the history of art nor in the attempts to write that history.”<sup>(27)</sup> Koerner cites, among other sources, a characteristically profound insight of Hegel: “The novelty of Christian and Romantic art consisted of taking the abject as its privileged object. Specifically, the tortured and crucified Christ, that ugliest of creatures in whom divine beauty became, through human evil, basest abjection.”<sup>(28)</sup>

Rudolph Wittkower begins his great text on art and architecture in Italy after the Council of Trent<sup>(29)</sup> by recording the decision of that council to display the wounds and agonies of the martyred, in order, through this display of affect, to elicit the sympathy of viewers and through that to strengthen threatened faith. “Even Christ must be shown ‘afflicted, bleeding, spat upon, with his skin torn, wounded, deformed, pale and unsightly’ if the subject calls for it.” The tendency in the Renaissance to beautify the crucified Christ was in effect a move to classicize Christianity by returning the tortured body to a kind of athletic grace, denying the basic message of Christian teaching that salvation is attained through abject suffering. The aestheticism of the Eighteenth century was a corollary of the rationalism of natural religion. It was Kant’s stunning achievement to situate aesthetics in the critical architectonic as a form of judgment two small steps away from pure reason. Romanticism, as in the philosophy of Hegel, was a re-affirmation of the Baroque values of the Counter-Reformation. The problem with art, as Hegel saw it, lay in its ineradicable dependence upon sensuous representation. As with the blood, the torn flesh, the

shattered bones, the flayed skin, the broken bodies, the reduction of consciousness to pain and agony in Baroque representation.

In view of the history of human suffering which has been the chief cultural product of the Twentieth century, it is astonishing standing, how abstract Twentieth century art really was. How innocent Dada was, in its artistic refusal to gratify the aesthetic sensibilities of those responsible for the First World War – to give them babbling in place of beauty, silliness instead of sublimity, injuring beauty through a kind of punitive clownishness.

What Abject art, so pathetic in its incapacity finally to do much to deflect or diminish the degradations of the body which the politics of our times has used as its means, has done is to seize upon the emblems of degradation as a way of crying out in the name of humanity. “For many in contemporary culture,” Hal Foster writes, “truth resides in the traumatic or abject subject, in the diseased or damaged body. Thus body is the evidentiary basis of important witnessings to truth, of necessary witnessings against power.”<sup>(30)</sup> Jean Clair accompanied his presentation with a number of slides, intended as visual support of his thesis.<sup>(31)</sup> George Steiner observed that

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Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937

the images reminded him of Bergen-Belsen. It was in its way a paraphrase of a famous interchange between Picasso and a German officer to whom he gave a picture of *Guernica*. The officer asked if he had done it, and Picasso responded by



saying No – that it was the Germans who had made *Guernica*. It was in effect not the artists who were responsible for these images, but their society.

What Duchamp can be credited with, through his transformation in the concept of art, was making it legitimate for the artists to use non-standard materials to make the kinds of critical points at which they aimed – to effectively rub society's nose in the emblem of its deficiency. For which kinds of substances to use as such elements, there was no need to have recourse to anything in Duchamp's largely cerebral oeuvre. The needed but exploit the universal vocabulary of disgust, the meaning of which is largely invariant from culture to culture and time to time.

What is amazing, given the enormity of human cruelty in our time, is how few contemporary artists have taken on this agenda – how little by way of abject art there has actually been. There was a certain amount of youthful probing of the boundaries of disgust in the *Sensation* show, but done with such boisterous good humor that it belonged more to the spirit of the Tuchlauben frescoes than to the decline of the west critics such as Jean Clair laments. In neither Whitney Biennial 2000 nor in the collateral Greater New York exhibition at PS1 in Long Island City, was there much abject art to speak of. On the contrary, I was overwhelmed, as an art critic, by the degree to which contemporary artists have transformed themselves into visual thinkers, the meaning of whose works is so distant from what meets the eye that one is able to connect with them only through some fairly elaborate exercises in interpretation. In this they too are the children of Duchamp, who showed them how to do philosophy by making art. As someone close to the scene, I am sometimes astonished by the goodness of artists in their dedication to the highest of moral principles and their unfailing respect for the human mind. The Muses should be proud.

\* This paper is by way of a response to a talk given by Jean

Clair, the director of the *Musée Picasso*, at a colloquium sponsored by The Nexus Foundation in Tilburg, in the Netherlands, on April TK, 2000. It is to be published, in Dutch translation, in NEXUS. I have been granted permission to publish it in English in the journal *Tout-Fait*, by the directors of NEXUS, Rob Rieman and Kirsten Walgreen. In expressing gratitude, I must declare my unbounded admiration for their personal dedication to the cause of cultural dialogue, as well as for the warmth, generosity, and friendship.

\* This text was composed on Mt.Desert Island, in the state of Maine, where, for the fourth season, I have been the grateful beneficiary of Kippy Stroud's generosity and vision, in providing a certain number of artists, museum people, and writers hospitality, privacy, and fellowship in ASAP – The Acadian Summer Program in the Arts – the closest to Duino Castle the United States affords. She is the Princess of Thurn und Taxis: it is not her fault that her guests are not all Rilkes!

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## Notes

[Footnote Return](#)

1. Jean Clair, *Marcel Duchamp et la fin de l'art*. Paris; Gallimard, 2000.

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2. Presented at the Nexus Conference in Tilberg, The Netherlands, May 21, 2000.

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3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Aesthetic Judgment*. §48.

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4.The very condition of decomposition which is that of the Muses today, in Jean Clair's putrefactive image.

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5. The *vanitas* paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, of course, abjured the disgusting in favor of such deflected symbolic representations as skulls or candles. The effort was clearly to aestheticize death.

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6.In *Beyond the Brillo Box*. (New York; Farrar Straus and Giroux,1992, 61).

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7.Kant, *ibid.* §16.

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8.Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way*. Volume III of *In Search of Lost Time*. Translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised by D.J. Enright. New York: Modern Library, 1998. 575.

[Footnote Return](#)

9. G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*. Translated by T.M. Knox. Oxford and New York; Oxford University Press, 1975, 34.

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10. Hegel, *ibid.*, 10.

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11.Hegel, *ibid.*,3.

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12.Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*. Princeton, New Jersey; Princeton University Press, 1987. 348-349.

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13.Jean Clair, "The Muses Decomposed." [Ed: the citation is from page 4/17 in the manuscript.]

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14.*ibid.* [page 6/17 in manuscript.]

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15. Though I have it on the authority of someone who witnessed the opening of one of these cans that what was found inside was another, smaller can, also labeled *merda di artista*.

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16. Jean Clair, "The Muses Decomposed." [3/17 in manuscript.]

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Marcel Duchamp, *Family Portrait* (1899), 1964 © 2000 Succession Marcel Duchamp, ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris

17. I shall make no effort to speculate with Jean Clair on the psychopathology of Duchamp himself. Thus I shall not concern myself with such *opuscula* as the family photograph Jean Clair makes so much of, cropped in the form of the urinal Duchamp used as *Fountain*, which was prepared for the catalog of an exhibition of his work at Cordier & Ekstrom, 1965, and is now part of the Collection Rhonda Roland Shearer, NY. It may, Jean Clair suggests, reveal a great deal about Duchamp's attitude to his parents. But it is difficult to believe it can have played any part to speak of in the subsequent history of art. I shall similarly resist speculating *ad hominem* on what accounts for Jean Clair seeing Duchamp's work as disgusting.

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18. Talk at Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 19, 1961. Reprinted in Michel Sanouillet (ed.) *Salt Seller*. New York; Oxford University Press, 1973.

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19. Letter from Duchamp to Hans Richter, 1962. In Robert Motherwell, *Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*. New York, Wittenborn, 1952. xiii.

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20. Pierre Chabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*. 68.

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21. Calvin Tomkins. *Duchamp: A Biography*. New York: Henry Holt, 1996. 131.

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22. Theophile Gauthier, Preface, *Mademoiselles de Maupin*.

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23. John Cage. Foreword . *M: Writings 67-72* Wesleyan University Press,

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24. The Art World. *Journal of Philosophy*. 61. 19 (1964). 571-84.

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25. Jean Clair, *Marcel Duchamp ou le grand fictif: Essai de Mythanalyse du Grand Verre*. Paris, 1974 . 12.

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26. "Le temps semble venu de soustraire Duchamp aux polémiques de l'avant-garde et aux confiscations abusives de telle ou telle de ses factions. Le temps est venue de le confronter aux analyses sereines de l'histoire. Il ne pourrait qu'y gagner." Ibid., 13. I take this as evidence that the excremental had not become a discernible affect of Duchamp's work by 1974, when Jean Clair wrote this. So what accounts for

its emergence since, if indeed it has emerged?

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27. Joseph Leo Koerner, "The Abject of Art History," *Res*, no31 (Spring1997), 7.

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28. Hegel, *Aesthetics*. .

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29. Rudolph Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy:1600-1750*. London; Pelican History of Art. 1958. 2.

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30. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge, Mass; MIT Press, 1999),166.

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31. Among them were some images of work by Cindy Sherman. Sherman is sometimes cited as an Abject artist, for her so called Disgusting images of vomit and her somewhat pornographic images based upon the use of anatomical figures she purchased from medical supply stores. But there is a kind of Halloween mischief in Sherman, an almost childish pleasure in being scary. Her art is in the direct descent from the Tuchlauben frescoes. The artist Sue Williams used a plastic simulacrum of vomit, purchased in a joke store, as a symbol through which to convey disgust in her piece shown in the highly politicized Whitney Biennial of 1993. In this work, she is an abject artist: the point of her piece was outrage at the abuse of women's bodies by men. The mark of abjection is not what substance the artist uses but what meaning she intends to convey.