Marcel Duchamp and the Museum of Forgery

When I was in high school, I fell for awhile under the spell of the curious life and work of the Dutch forger Hans van Meegeren. I was particularly struck by how the forger's art is simultaneously self-aggrandizing and self-effacing, selfish and generous, bold and timid. This early entrancement opened into a broader fascination with dubious artworks of all kinds, especially those that floated on the borders of acceptability—misattributed works, "school of" works, authorized copies, partial fakes, restored works, and so on.

Eventually it occurred to me that the world needed a museum devoted entirely to the subject of forgery. I was thinking of something on the scale of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where all of the world's most interesting forgeries and fakes, as well as contested works, could find a home. There the works that are normally banished to the basement and the scholar's office would be displayed in public as rightful exhibits in the great ongoing debate over what constitutes art and how we assign value to objects. At the same time, I realized that very likely no one would ever found such a museum, filled as it would be with works that most people consider valueless and shameful.

In the late 1980s, after the museum idea had lain dormant for awhile, I started using computers as part of my art-making process, and the deceptively simple fact that copies of digital files are perfectly identical to their originals started me thinking again about the relationship between reproduction and value. Around the same time, I happened to be reading Gianfranco Baruchello and Henry Martin's wonderful book *Why Duchamp?* and mulling over what is involved in asserting that something is or is not a work of art. It came to me that it would be truer to the paradoxical nature of a

museum of forgery if such an institution were dedicated to the practice rather than simply the display of forgery, and I decided to found my own Museum of Forgery along such lines. Display of forgery within the museum raises questions about where the boundary between authentic and inauthentic lies but accepts the idea of the boundary, while practice of forgery within the museum erases that boundary by asserting a fundamental identity between the museum and that which the museum rejects.

A great part of what museums still have to offer of unique value is their institutional authority, a point that Marcel Broodthaers took long ago when he created the Museum of the Eagle. This enduring authority is a second reason why I founded a museum instead of, say, doing a series of projects about forgery. Being the director of a museum gave me a way to speak and be heard on so tendentious a subject as forgery. In this, as in many other aspects, the Museum of Forgery is a child of Marcel Duchamp: it nominated itself as a museum despite the fact that by many definitions it does not belong in that category at all.

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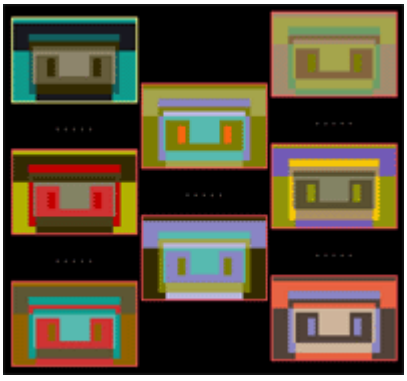


Figure 1
Josef Albers: *Studies in Transmitted Light*, 1993, generic posthumous albers. A series of digital works created especially for

the Museum of Forgery to
extend Josef Albers' reflected
-light color studies into the
realm of transmitted light.
Each image is a study in the
color properties of transmitted
light viewable through such devices
as computer monitors.

In other ways, too, the Museum of Forgery is both museum and anti-museum. It has a permanent collection some of which is now digital, which is to say that a substantial portion of its collection consists of items that are neither objects nor singular. The Museum of Forgery's first all-digital project was Studies in Transmitted Light, a series of color studies extending Josef Albers's work with color in reflected-light media, such as paint, to the very different realm of transmitted-light media, such as monitors. (Fig. 1) There is not only no reason to output these works in the realm of material media—say, as paper-based prints—there is every reason not to do so.

What physical collection the Museum has is dispersed; indeed, the Museum has never had a single physical location of any kind where it could be visited. Like most institutions, it is largely façade-a name with a mailing address or, more recently, an Internet address. It isn't even quite right to say that you can visit it on the web-it would be by loading itself into your browser.[1]

Duchamp the Forger

As the Museum of Forgery unfolded bit by bit, it became clear that one of its chief lines of inquiry was going to be what I loosely call nominalism—artworks in which the primary activity is attaching a new name to something. In semiotic terms, this art of renaming always disrupts an understood link between signifier and signified. In the simplest sense, all art is

nominalist: when the artist attaches her signature in the corner, the painting of a landscape becomes no longer “a landscape” but “an O’Keeffe.” The signature bears witness to the creator’s existence, and in doing so elides the distinction between artwork and artist. Both are “an O’Keeffe.” [(2)]

Forgery, on the other hand, twists the function of the signature, forcing it to bear witness to the actual creator’s absence by pointing to some other more famous person, the creator. Forgers accept that what is key is not who actually created the work but what name is attached to the work (to put it in market terms, they understand the importance of name branding). From this perspective, Marcel Duchamp is more easily understood as a forger than an artist, or perhaps as the first person to really bridge these traditionally opposed fields. Forgery has varying definitions, but most fundamentally it is that-which-is-not-art. However much it may resemble art, it is absolutely excluded from being art. The forger’s object is to pass these absolutely excluded objects into the field of art under the flag of the signature. This effort can never wholly succeed because forgeries have only two ontological statuses: valueless-because-known-as-forgery, and valuable-because-not-yet-exposed. The missing third category is valuable-even-though-exposed; and it is with this category that Duchamp made great play.[(3)]

When Duchamp attached the name art to various ready-made items by means of the secondary name (signature) Duchamp, he was following the method of the forger. These nominations of ordinary objects as art were a kind of up-front forgery in that they attempted to pass off something understood to be worthless (in the context of art) as something valuable. Duchamp’s method of forgery was unique in several respects. In the first place, even as Duchamp accepted the preeminence of his signature as that which gave the work value, he used it to point away from itself. His nominations tend to cast the

emphasis back onto that to which his signature is attached: the thing chosen (a urinal!) tends to displace the act of signing (nominated by Duchamp). In the case of most forgery, by contrast, the signature (a Leonardo!) is enormously more important than the work signed (a painting of something-or-other).

In the second place, he worked in the open, thus unlinking the idea of forgery from the necessity of deceit. In this respect he worked in a mode made so familiar to us by corporate capitalism as to be almost invisible: he attached his brand name Duchamp to an otherwise ordinary object that was actually the product of someone else's labor. In his work with ready-mades, Duchamp essentially created a new market for a few existing products, and part of his genius lay in recognizing and treating the art world as a modern market—not just a place where artworks were marketed (as it already was), but a place where works of any kind could be marketed as art.

In the third place, Duchamp forged himself. The usual forger forges someone else; that is, nominates one of her own works as a Leonardo or a Picasso. The forger thus appropriates someone else's name to her own object. Duchamp, however, appropriated someone else's object to his own name; or, to look at it the other way around, expropriated his name to someone else's object. Thus, all of his ready-mades were forged Duchamps in the same sense that Van Meegeren's paintings were forged Vermeers. In both cases the signature does not correspond to the creator of the object.

Excessioning

In selecting works to bear his signature, Duchamp also opened a new line of thinking in which affinity with the work selected becomes more important than the mode of its creation. As in the bulk of his other work, he points away from the reigning mythology centered on "the hand of the artist." In this also he has something in common with forgers, who must of

necessity imitate the hand of particular artists but whose very attempt to do so asserts that the chosen hand is not unique (because imitable) and therefore not worth the supreme value assigned to it.

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Figure 2
Invasion of the Body
Snatchers, Piazza S.
Gaetano, Naples, 1958/1992,
29 x 21 cm, generic baldessari.
A work commissioned by the Museum
of Forgery and contributed to
the oeuvre of John Baldessari.

The idea of looking at the relationship of artist to artwork as one of affinity rather than production was the spur that led me to form the Museum of Forgery's Excessioning Program. Under this program, new works are attributed to the oeuvres of appropriate artists, living or dead, regardless of who actually created them. The Museum of Forgery has created (or commissioned) works "by" Marcel Duchamp, Josef Albers, and John Baldessari, among others, as part of its Excessioning Program (Fig. 2).

Just as it sounds, excessioning is an inversion of the normal museum activity of accessioning, reflecting a fundamentally outward orientation, a movement away from the museum itself.

By contrast, the existing word de-accessioning reflects the inward orientation of traditional museums: de-accessioning can only be a secondary activity, subordinate to the primary activity of collecting (accessioning). The underlying impulse behind excessioning is to recover a sense of both generosity and honesty in the way artworks are categorized and discussed. Works that are part of a particular aesthetic-a duchampian aesthetic or an albersian aesthetic-are explicitly recognized as such, in contrast to the usual art world practice of concealing and minimizing a new work's resemblance to its predecessors. [4]

The Excessioning Program models itself on the larger social practice by which well-known trademarks, like Kleenex or Band-Aid, eventually pass into common vocabulary as generic nouns—small-k kleenex—despite intensive and prolonged efforts by the parent companies to prevent this. Manufacturers may be forced by law to use ugly circumlocutions like "facial tissue" on their boxes, but the rest of the world just asks for a kleenex. Similarly, *Mona Lisa*the brand-name Leonardo has given way to "mona lisa," a generic that includes Duchamp's many variations on *L.H.O.O.Q.* (Parenthetically, it is interesting that Duchamp's guess that any artwork has a meaningful life span of about 30 years is not far off the patentable life of a commercial product.)

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Figure 3
Shark's Pocket, 1992,
11 x 17 x 2 cm overall, generic
posthumous duchamp. A shark's pocket

made of genuine faux sealskin and
contributed by the Museum of
Forgery to the oeuvre of Marcel Duchamp.
This work is currently on extended
loan to the Museum of the Double.

Similarly, small-d duchamps are generically all those works of art that belong to the aesthetic pool Duchamp himself started. An early Museum of Forgery project was the *Shark's Pocket*, a small object of faux sealskin shaped exactly like an ordinary pants pocket (Fig. 3). It has been sewn closed, and concealed inside is a mystery item, the answer to a question I asked myself one day: if sharks had pockets, what would they carry in them? Once it was created, the affinity with Duchamp's 1916 work*With Hidden Noise* and the general absurdity of the premise led me to declare it a generic duchamp.

In the years since I founded the Excessioning Program, I've noticed the idea of generics popping up in other contexts—not, I think, as a result of the Museum's activities so much as a general effect of zeitgeist. I recently heard an artist refer to something she had just made as a "cornell box" and knew instantly what kind of thing she meant. And anyone who has read William Gibson's 1987 cyberpunk novel *Count Zero* will remember the artificial intelligence that spends its time making small-c cornell boxes which others then pass off—for large sums of money—as large-C Cornell boxes.

Generics, as the Museum calls the fruits of its Excessioning Program, reflect the cultural shift towards the privileging of information over objects. A duchampian generic is essentially a transmission vector for some of Duchamp's ideas, which are more important and enduring than any single one of his works. Indeed, even traditional art museums today are less object repositories and sites of pilgrimage than culture transmitters and sites of shopping. In sponsoring manifold replications, from postcards to coffee mugs to replica jewelry, museums function as memetic factories. The vermiform collection exists

not to be visited so much as to be reproduced. Museums have become little more than businesses whose primary product is art spin-offs, with large showrooms where their very handsome product templates are tastefully displayed.

Do-It-Yourself Forgeries

It is in part because our attention is currently focused on reproduction in all its varieties that the Internet and other digital media are displacing the museum and the gallery as loci of art activity. In the computer, originals and copies no longer mark out opposite ends of a fixed spectrum but define something more like a field with points of attraction but without fixed positions. The computer is the realm of the original copy, the simulated original, the multiple singularity, the infinite variation.

Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* works prefigure the fluid metamorphoses of digital art, the return to a practice centered on themes and (valuable) variations rather than originals and (degraded) copies. At one point, he took a group of ordinary postcard reproductions of the Mona Lisa and entitled them *L.H.O.O.Q.* Rasée (*Shaved L.H.O.O.Q.*), thus implicitly declaring the Leonardo Mona Lisa a modified version of his own *L.H.O.O.Q.* Duchamp's work thus became, by an act of temporal transubstantiation, the original, and Leonardo's the incomplete copy.

These and other Duchampian projects—such as the authorized *Bicycle Wheel* replicas—prefigure two other areas of Museum activity, authorized forgeries (Fig. 4) and do-it-yourself forgeries. In order to encourage forgery as a practice the Museum publishes step-by-step directions for re-creating existing artworks. One such DIY project, The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart, can be found on the Museum's web site (Fig. 5). At the same time, the instructions are loose enough to leave scope for individual variation, as a way of encouraging a new aesthetic of close copies. In Western

art since the rise of individualism, it has been impossible for an aesthetic of close copying and subtle variation to arise; close copies are consistently devalued with such terms as “forgery,” “student work,” or just plain “copy.” The DIY forgeries attempt to reclaim the practice of copying by harnessing it to the popular do-it-yourself movement. Although in some respects both nostalgic and a product of mass-marketing—a typically American contradiction—the DIY movement does reflect an underlying belief in experimentation and a championship of making over buying. [5]Paradoxically, creating a do-it-yourself forgery brings the maker much closer to the practice of art than buying a Van Gogh poster in a museum ever could.

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- Figure 4
- Figure 5

- *Snotrags*,ca. 1992, approx.

10 x 20 in. overall (not including instructions).
An authorized forgery created by
Yolande McKay for the Museum of
Forgery, this work also doubles as
a kind of prototype for a do-it-yourself
forgery since it includes an
instruction sheet for making one's
own version of the piece.
The instructions read in part: "Only
a sick person can complete
this forgery….blow your nose or in
some other projectile manner
apply mucoid matter to snotrag
provided….apply forged
signature with small brush and paint."

- Slem Joost, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, 1992/93,
24 x 32 x 10.5 cm, mixed media.
The original of this do-it-yoursel
fforgery was created by Joost,
a Dutch artist, under the
inspiration of a poem by the
French poet Guillaume Apollinaire.

The Museum of Forgery is now just a decade old. It quite often happens that someone will write the Museum asking to be taught how to counterfeit money or fake antique furniture (apparently without any anxiety over the fact that this might be an indiscreet question to put to a complete stranger). And each time I get such an inquiry, I am reminded again of just how tempting it is to believe that what you see is what you get: despite the evidence of its web site, the Museum of Forgery must be simply what it says it is. In this new age of WYSIWYG [(6)]everything, the real problem remains the same as ever: what you assume is what you get.

Notes

Work Cited:

Baruchello, Gianfranco and Henry Martin,Why Duchamp? (New York: McPherson, 1985).

Footnote Return 1. The Museum of Forgery's web address is http://yin.arts.uci.edu/~mof/index.html.

Footnote Return 2. Formerly, this relationship was made explicit by following the painter's name with the verbs pinxit or fecit—X painted (made) this therefore X was here-but in current practice, the signature alone stands in for the statement. It has long been common to refer to particular pieces in an artist's oeuvre as signature works, these being the works considered most characteristic of the artist, and thus most credible as mute witnesses to being.

Footnote Return 3. There is a fourth category, of course: valueless-although-not-yet-exposed. Although interesting in its own right, it lies somewhat outside the current discussion.

Footnote Return 4. A secondary impulse is to extend the terrain that is open to exploration by artists. As matters now stand, in the futile quest for novelty, large areas of the Library of Form are roped off and marked with no-trespassing signs: Property of Brand-Name-Artist X, Keep Out. In some cases the boundaries are enforced by law (especially copyright law), but in many cases the prohibitions are self-enforced by artists who recognize that, as the game is currently played, it is professional suicide to become known as an "imitator" or "follower" of Brand-Name-Artist X.

Footnote Return 5. Although the belief in experimentation is duchampian, the elevation of creating over buying is distinctly un-duchampian.

Footnote Return 6. [Editor’s note:] Short for “what you see is what you get.”