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ABSTRACT

In 1917, when the American Society of Independent Artists refused to exhibit a porcelain urinal that Marcel Duchamp had submitted to them as a sculpture, a friend of Duchamp's wrote : "There are those who anxiously ask: 'Is he serious or is he joking?' Perhaps he is both!" Duchamp's behavior - making a provocative and radically innovative artistic gesture, then declining to explain his motives in the face of accusations that this was a hoax - became a model that subsequently inspired a series of iconoclastic young conceptual innovators. These include many of the most important artists of the twentieth century, and their line of descent runs from Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, Yves Klein, and Piero Manzoni to Gilbert & George, Jeff Koons, Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst. The ambiguity of these artists' actions has triggered heated and persistent debates over the sincerity of their work, which have increased the effectiveness of the work's attacks on existing artistic conventions at the same time that they have advanced the artists' reputations and careers. The model of the conceptual artist as trickster is a novel feature of the innovative conceptual art of the past century, and it has produced a type of conceptual art that is more personal than nearly all other forms of art: we can never look at their work without thinking not only of their ideas - what is the artistic significance of a manufactured object purchased at a hardware store, or a silkscreen of a photograph taken from a magazine - but also of their attitudes - was Fountain or Fat Chair really intended to be taken seriously?

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The Accusation

> The artist does not say today, "Come and see faultless work," but "Come and see sincere work."
>
> Edouard Manet, 1867[1]

When Edouard Manet exhibited *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* at the Salon des Refusés in 1863, the critic Louis Etienne described the painting as an "unbecoming rebus," and denounced it as "a young man's practical joke, a shameful open sore not worth exhibiting this way."[2] Two years later, when Manet's *Olympia* was shown at the Salon, the critic Félix Jahyer wrote that the painting was indecent, and declared that "I cannot take this painter's intentions seriously." The critic Ernest Fillonneau claimed this reaction was a common one, for "an epidemic of crazy laughter prevails... in front of the canvases by Manet." Another critic, Jules Clarétie, described Manet's two paintings at the Salon as "challenges hurled at the public, mockeries or parodies, how can one tell?"[3] In his review of the Salon, the critic Théophile Gautier concluded his condemnation of Manet's paintings by remarking that "Here there is nothing, we are sorry to say, but the desire to attract attention at any price."[4]

The most decisive rejection of these charges against Manet was made in a series of articles published in 1866-67 by the young critic and writer Emile Zola. Zola began by declaring that those who laughed at Manet were fools: "There isn't the least thing laughable in all this. There is only a sincere artist following his own bent." Zola made a prediction: "I am so sure that Manet will be one of the masters of tomorrow that I should believe I had made a good bargain, had I the money, in buying all his canvases today. In fifty years they will sell for fifteen or twenty times more." Zola, who would later gain fame as a literary realist, specifically defended Manet's integrity and sincerity as a visual realist: "He has then courageously set himself in front of a

subject, he has seen this subject in broad areas of color, by strong contrasts, and he has painted each thing as he has seen it. Who dares here to speak of paltry calculation, who dares to accuse a conscientious artist of mocking art and himself?" Zola underscored the point: "Manet paints in an unaffected and completely serious manner."[5]

Zola's contention that Manet was not deliberately provoking attacks on his work was clearly correct, for Manet disliked criticism, and reacted badly to it. In 1865, the poet Charles Baudelaire, a friend of Manet's, wrote to another friend of Manet's distress at the controversy over *Olympia*: "He strikes me as depressed and overwhelmed by the shock." Another close friend of Manet's, Antonin Proust, noted in 1865 that the criticism of the artist's work had demoralized him: "However disposed he may have been to work had he received encouragement, his fervor collapsed before the cruelty and injustice of those who did not understand him."[6] Looking back on this period later in his life, Manet admitted the damage the critics had done: "The attacks directed against me broke me in the mainspring of life. No one knows what it is to be consistently insulted. It disheartens you and undoes you."[7]

A number of visitors to Pablo Picasso's Montmartre studio early in 1907 were shocked by the large new painting that would later be titled *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Among those visitors was Georges Braque, whose reaction to the painting was to compare Picasso to the fairground fire-eaters who swallowed tow and drank kerosene in order to spit flames.[8] Yet Braque soon realized that Picasso's new work was not a stunt, and little more than a year later he joined Picasso in the development of Cubism. Picasso had little interest in publicizing his new work, and in fact did not exhibit the *Demoiselles* for nearly a decade.

Manet and Picasso were both young conceptual artists who produced radical innovations

that shocked many in the art world. Their willingness to violate cherished conventions early in their careers made it tempting for detractors to dismiss them as immature tricksters who were playing practical jokes merely to gain attention. These charges appear to have been unfounded with respect to both Manet and Picasso. Yet the potential for artists to gain attention by presenting radical innovations that can be seen as tricks was nonetheless real. The danger in doing this was that once an action came to be generally considered as a trick or hoax, the perpetrator could be discredited, and any benefit from the earlier publicity could be lost. To be of lasting value to the artist, any action that gained attention by being condemned as a trick or joke would therefore have to have the potential for the artist to maintain that it was in fact a serious contribution. Direct denials are usually unpersuasive in the face of such attacks, however, so subtler defenses are necessary if the artist is to weather these critical firestorms. With the proper response from the artist, the effect of the attacks can be reversed, and transformed into a positive force in establishing the importance of the art. Specifically, if the artist can avoid becoming defensive in the face of the criticism, the anger and hostility of the critics can be interpreted as proof that the artist's innovation has successfully controverted some central tenet of previous artistic practice. Then the more vehement the denunciations, the greater the evidence they provide of the significance of the new contribution.

The twentieth century has witnessed a series of artists whose behavior conforms with this insight. A series of young conceptual artists have offered radically innovative works that have been seen by many in the art world as tricks or hoaxes. Confronted by these charges, the artists have either remained silent, or have offered only enigmatic or elliptical statements in defense of their work. In this way, these artists have gained publicity not only initially, as a result of the

criticism that has greeted their work, but also subsequently, as a result of the debate that has ensued over whether their work is to be dismissed as a hoax or valued as a novel contribution to art. For these artists, ambiguity has become a positive and powerful force in establishing the value of their art, and advancing their careers. If the artist achieves just the right balance, admirers and detractors can debate indefinitely whether his work is a joke or a serious contribution, a crude parody or a sophisticated new idea. Such debates tend to confer substantial benefits on the artist.

The Prototype

> I suppose every young generation needs a prototype. In this case, I play that role. I'm delighted to.
>
> Marcel Duchamp[9]

Marcel Duchamp was modern art's original model of the contrary, enigmatic maverick as conceptual innovator. He posed radical conceptual challenges to conventional art, and increased the effectiveness of these attacks by skillfully deflecting the question of whether his actions were taken in earnest.

In conversations with the critic Pierre Cabanne recorded late in the artist's life, Duchamp recalled the lessons he had learned as a young painter in Paris. One concerned the value of silence. Cubism had been the exciting new development of the time, and although minor artists attempted to explain it to the public, the true leader of the movement didn't: "Picasso never explained anything. It took a few years to see that not talking was better than talking too much."[10] Another lesson, that he should remain aloof from other artists, came from a painful personal experience. Not only was Duchamp's own contribution to Cubism, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, rejected by the Salon des Indépendants in 1912, but it was Duchamp's two older

brothers, the painter Jacques Villon and the sculptor Raymond Duchamp-Villon, who were delegated to deliver the news of the rejection to Duchamp. Stung both by the rejection and by his brothers' lack of loyalty, Duchamp reflected that the incident had liberated him: "I said, 'All right, since it's like that, there's no question of joining a group - I'm going to count on no one but myself alone.'"[11] He admitted, however, that a young colleague had taught him yet another lesson. Francis Picabia, who subsequently became Duchamp's closest friend, demonstrated how an artist could exert a contrary influence, from outside the groups that dominated the advanced art world of the day. Duchamp explained that Picabia was "a negator. With him it was always, 'Yes, but ...' and 'No, but ...' Whatever you said, he contradicted. It was his game."[12]

These early lessons all contributed to the persona that Duchamp appears to have deliberately created, in which irony and ambiguity became powerful weapons in an attack on received practices and positions. In one exchange with Cabanne, Duchamp explained that he avoided all fixed attitudes:

> Cabanne: One has the impression that every time you commit yourself to a position, you attenuate it by irony or sarcasm.
> Duchamp: I always do. Because I don't believe in positions.
> Cabanne: But what do you believe in?
> Duchamp: Nothing, of course! The word "belief" is another error. It's like the word "judgment," they're both horrible ideas.[13]

This detached and lofty persona became the foundation for Duchamp's one-man crusade to reverse the direction of modern art. He observed that in the modern era artists had been freed from the demands of patrons, but he regretted that artists had used their new-found freedom to produce an art that lacked intellectual content, and was devoted merely to pleasing the eye:

> That famous liberation of the artist at the time of Courbet changed the status of the artist from the employee of a patron or collector to

> a free individual. By "free," I mean the artist was able to paint what he wanted... This liberation in the nineteenth century took the form of impressionism, which in a way was the beginning of a cult devoted to the material on the canvas - the actual pigment. Instead of interpreting through the pigment, the impressionists gradually fell in love with the pigment, the paint itself. Their intentions were completely retinal and divorced from the classical use of paint as a means to an end. The last hundred years have been retinal... Today abstract expressionism seems to have reached the apex of this retinal approach. It's still going strong but I doubt whether this is the art of the future. One hundred years of the retinal approach is enough. Earlier, paint was always a means to an end, whether the end was religious, political, social, decorative or romantic. Now it's become an end in itself.[14]

Duchamp's goal was to restore art to its proper conceptual purpose: "I wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting... I was interested in ideas - not merely in visual products. I wanted to put painting once more at the service of the mind."[15]

Duchamp's most radical assault on retinal art was his invention of the readymade, manufactured objects that he selected and designated as works of art. Characteristically, he avoided discussing the precise significance of his new genre: "I've never been able to arrive at a definition or explanation that fully satisfies me. There's still magic in the idea, so I'd rather keep it that way than try to be exoteric about it."[16] Yet in a talk at New York's Museum of Modern Art Duchamp stressed that aesthetic considerations played no role in his selection of objects: "A point which I want very much to establish is that the choice of these 'readymades' was never dictated by aesthetic delectation. This choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste."[17]

Duchamp made the first readymade in 1913, by attaching a bicycle wheel to a stool, and he coined the term "readymade" two years later. But the fame of the readymade dates from 1917,

and the first exhibition of the newly established American Society of Independent Artists. The society had been established the year before, to promote advanced American art by holding annual exhibitions with a policy of "no jury, no prizes." Duchamp was a member of the board of directors, and his anti-authoritarian attitude was reflected in the society's stated policy of inclusiveness, as any artist who joined the society was entitled to show two works. A week before the first exhibition opened, Duchamp purchased a porcelain urinal, signed it with the fictitious name R. Mutt, titled it *Fountain*, and submitted it, along with R. Mutt's membership fee, to the society. *Fountain* outraged many of the society's organizers, and the board of directors voted to reject it. Duchamp immediately resigned from the board in protest.[18]

Duchamp later admitted to Cabanne that submitting *Fountain* to the Independents had been "rather provocative":

> Cabanne: Well, since you were looking for scandal, you were satisfied?
> Duchamp: It was, indeed, a success. In that sense.
> Cabanne: You really would have been disappointed had the *Fountain* been welcomed...
> Duchamp: Almost. As it was, I was enchanted.[19]

The society's refusal to exhibit *Fountain*, technically in violation of its own policy not to judge submissions, allowed Duchamp both to highlight the hypocrisy of established artists and to publicize in stark form the nature of his conceptual challenge to the artistic conventions of the day. In *The Blind Man*, a small magazine published by Duchamp and a few friends in the wake of the incident, an article signed by Louise Norton lamented that "Like Mr. Mutt, many of us had quite an exorbitant notion of the independence of the Independents. It was a sad surprise to learn of a Board of Censors sitting upon the ambiguous question, What is ART?" That question was so

radical that it had little immediate impact, but its challenge reemerged in the late 1950s, when a number of young artists set out to break down the traditional barriers surrounding art, and it then became perhaps the single most potent force generating the art of the remainder of the twentieth century. And many of the central figures in the production of that art were furthermore influenced by an aspect of Duchamp's behavior that was also identified by Louise Norton, who declared that: "there are those who anxiously ask, 'Is he serious or is he joking?' Perhaps he is both! Is it not possible?"[20]

With the *Fountain* incident, Duchamp thus not only provided future conceptual artists with an agenda, of challenging the boundaries of art, but also gave them a powerful stance from which to pursue it. This stance used irony and detachment effectively to insulate the innovator from criticism, for whenever provocative conceptual acts produced the inevitable reaction of outrage from critics and other artists, the innovator could express his amusement, and the criticism would become proof of the value of the innovation. Thus Norton explained, "there is among us today a spirit of 'blague' arising out of the artist's bitter vision of an over-institutionalized world of stagnant statistics and antique axioms... [O]ur artists are sometimes sad, and if there is a shade of bitter mockery in some of them, it is only there because they know that the joyful spirit of their work is to this age a hidden treasure."[21] As the critic Harold Rosenberg later observed, "In the case of Duchamp...the antagonism he arouses is an essential element of his role, and even, if one wishes, of his greatness and profundity."[22] Yet Thomas Hess recognized that Duchamp's stance afforded him an extraordinary protection: "Marcel Duchamp over the years brilliantly has consolidated a position that is practically invulnerable to serious criticism."[23]

Duchamp's preeminence as the great artistic trickster of the twentieth century is widely recognized. One recent statement is that of Roger Shattuck: "Marcel Duchamp appointed himself the court jester of twentieth-century art. We have had many eccentrics, fanatics, and experimenters, but only one astute wag who understood that he could mix enigma and spoof in approximately equal proportions and be tolerated as a contraband artist."[24]Arthur Danto declared that "Duchamp's gestures of 1913-17 were jokes."[25] Danto pointed to a major consequence of the conceptual orientation of Duchamp, and named his primary heirs: "Since Duchamp, it has been possible to be a visual artist without being a painter, a sculptor, a draftsman, or even a photographer, or without displaying much by way of skill in the incidental employment of these crafts, as long as one has the right sort of transfigurative intelligence. His two greatest followers have been Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys." Danto also stressed the extreme conceptual nature of these three artists' innovations: "it is only necessary to recall the large retrospective exhibitions of Duchamp and Warhol at the Museum of Modern Art, or of Beuys at the Guggenheim, to appreciate that we are dealing with a form of artistic creativity of an altogether different genre than that of Matisse or Motherwell or Pollock or de Kooning. These were aggregates of puzzling objects, often aesthetically repellent but always conceptually exalting. They were shows one had to think one's way through, one object at a time."[26] Harold Rosenberg isolated another central legacy of Duchamp's career: "Duchamp placed innovative art under permanent suspicion of being a hoax." Rosenberg furthermore pointed out a distinctive characteristic of Duchamp's art that would also become part of the model he created for later conceptual artists: "Picasso is undoubtedly at least equal to Duchamp as an art-world presence, but when one thinks of Picasso there is a strong inflection toward the objectively interrelated

mass of his creations, whereas in regard to Duchamp the works are reflected in the changing silhouette of their creator. Every Duchamp piece is a piece of Duchamp, and derives its meaning from the spectator's total impression of the artist."[27]

The Followers

> I'm not more intelligent than I appear.
> Andy Warhol[28]

Joseph Beuys was among the most controversial of Duchamp's heirs. Throughout his career, an active debate continued between his admirers and his detractors: "Beuys is credited with brilliance, insightfulness, and lyricism, as well as fraudulence, hokum, and preposterous simplicity. Which is the real Beuys?"[29] Beuys created a complex persona, based in large part on a myth he created about an experience he claimed to have had as a fighter pilot in World War II. In his account, after his Luftwaffe plane had been shot down in the Crimea, Tartar tribesmen saved his life, salving his injuries with animal fat, and wrapping him in felt to warm him. Fat and felt subsequently became key elements in his art, and throughout his life he always wore a felt Stetson hat, supposedly necessitated by injuries to his head suffered in the place crash. The hat was just one of Beuys' props. Irving Sandler described the ensemble:

> To be effective Beuys had to attract the attention of the media. To this end he fashioned a memorable - a trademark - persona that featured a felt hat (atop his sallow, hollow-cheeked face), an apple green fisherman's vest, jeans, heavy shoes, fur-lined overcoat, and knapsack.[30]

A Danish critic remarked of Beuys that "If you go by appearances, he is a fantastic figure, half-way between a clown and gangster."[31]

Beuys wanted to expand the concept of art: in his philosophy, anything can be seen as art, and everyone is an artist. He referred to all his varied activities - sculpture, performance, teaching, and ecological and political activism - as "social sculpture," and he declared that "My objects are to be seen as stimulants for the transformation of the idea of sculpture, or of art in general."[32] His work was both highly conceptual and very personal: confronted by a Beuys retrospective exhibition, Rosalind Krauss remarked that "One is almost helpless without the explanations supplied by the artist."[33] As a biographer explained, "Beuys was an enigma; he did everything differently. But everything he did was unmistakably the man himself: the sculpture *Joseph Beuys*."[34]

The variety of Beuys' activities defies any attempt to summarize the nature of his work, and the complexity of his discourse makes any description of his motivations problematic. In 1965 he created one of his most celebrated works, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, in a Dusseldorf gallery. After pouring honey over his head and covering his face with gold leaf, Beuys walked around the gallery and talked about the paintings to a dead hare he held in his arms, letting it touch the pictures with its paw. After finishing the tour, Beuys sat and thoroughly explained the pictures to the hare. In 1974 Beuys enacted *I Like America and America Likes Me* by having himself locked in a New York gallery for three days with a live coyote. Beuys wrapped himself in felt, and had only a shepherd's crook to defend himself. The two lived peacefully together in their cage.[35]

Beuys became a role model for many young European artists, because of his concern for the democratization of art, his use of art for political and social protest, and his close personal identification of art with the constructed image of the artist. His career presented a basic

ambiguity: “Beuys is self-consciously paradoxical - unashamedly double. He presents himself as a shaman and showman - mystic and spectacle - simultaneously. His integrity consists in his openness about his seemingly unresolvable ‘duplicity’.”[36] He became a cult figure: “No other artist (with the possible exception of Andy Warhol, who certainly generated a totally different kind of myth) managed - and probably never intended - to puzzle and scandalize his primarily bourgeois art audience to the extent that he would become a figure of worship.”[37] Beuys appears to have been ambivalent toward Duchamp: in 1964 he participated in a television program titled *The Silence of Marcel Duchamp is Overrated*; he resented a remark made by Duchamp that denigrated the Performance art of the 1960s as unoriginal; and he insisted that his celebrated sculpture *Fat Chair* had nothing to do with Duchamp’s readymades.[38] Yet it is difficult to believe that Beuys’ careful construction of his own artistic myth, and his skillful use of ambiguity in doing so, was not based on a thorough understanding of Duchamp’s earlier practice. Thus for example Johannes Cladders argued that Duchamp and Beuys were the two twentieth-century artists who had been most mythologized, and observed that “I think Beuys felt himself to be in competition with his fellow ‘myth.’”[39]

Calvin Tomkins judged that “It may be that Andy Warhol was Duchamp’s truest heir - the one artist who pushed the implications of Duchamp’s ideas to conclusions that not even Duchamp had foreseen. Publicity, repetition, and all-out commercialism, the elements on which Warhol’s art was based, can each be seen as the flip side of Duchampian indifference.”[40] Harold Rosenberg declared that “The innovation of Andy Warhol consists not in his paintings but in his version of the comedy of the artist as a public figure,” and conceded that “his performance goes beyond that of Marcel Duchamp.”[41] Kelly Cresap, who titled his book about Warhol *Pop*

Trickster Fool, observed that "In recent years scholars have alternately characterized Warhol as a sixties intellectual; as someone who had the saving grace of being 'never in the least intellectual'; and as 'the great idiot savant of our time'... Warhol's ability to generate concern about his intelligence easily qualifies as one of the most inspired and effortlessly self-regenerating publicity stints of his career - a nearly irresistible tactic for attracting an audience and holding it in his spell."[42] Matthew Collings' analysis of Warhol recalls Louise Norton's question concerning whether Duchamp couldn't be simultaneously serious and joking: "An important thing about Warhol... was his way of being original and at the same time staging originality. With him, it was a massive staging, with all pretense of not staging absolutely stripped away."[43]

In interviews, Warhol blithely offered radical challenges to traditional conceptions of art. So for example in 1963 he told an interviewer that differences among artistic approaches were overrated: "How can you say one style is better than another? You ought to be able to be an Abstract-Expressionist next week, or a Pop artist, or a realist, without feeling you've given up something." And he maintained that the same was true of differences among artists: "I think it would be great if more people took up silk screens so that no one would know whether my picture was mine or somebody else's."[44] Nor was he concerned with the issue of what constituted his work: "I think somebody should be able to do all my paintings for me." Cresap detailed Warhol's challenges to the reigning art of the preceding generation:

> Warhol played the role of vacuous fraud to the hilt, performing a series of ruses or "dupes" upon the ground rules of the previous artistic dispensation. If late-modernist art was promoted as a strenuous, "heroic" undertaking, Warhol proclaimed how easy and fun painting was. In contrast to the image of the isolated genius creating art ex nihilo, he pinched ideas from friends, lifted images wholesale from preexisting photos and logos, and enlisted labor-

> saving assistants. Where Jackson Pollock forcefully confronted his canvases in a style known as "action" painting, Warhol abandoned painterly gestures in favor of overhead projection, stencil-work, silkscreen transfer, and gridlike repetition. His statement "I want to be a machine" mercilessly deflates the Romantic pretensions of Pollock's statement, "I am nature."[45]

Warhol generally declined to discuss his background. As he told one interviewer, "I'd prefer to remain a mystery, I never like to give my background and, anyway, I make it all up different every time I'm asked. It's not just that it's part of my image not to tell everything, it's just that I forget what I said the day before and I have to make it up all over again." In fact, he claimed, there wasn't much to know about him: "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface: of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it."[46] The curator Henry Geldzahler commented on Warhol's success in creating his own image:

> There is a quality to Andy Warhol's public persona that inspires endless discussion, quite unlike that of any other artist. Such discussions inevitably center on the question of his intentions and the artist's control over the meanings in his work which are often subtle and contradictory. He has cultivated to perfection a naïve blankness, a bottomless well of innocence when forced to declare himself on an issue... The truth is that those of us who have been among his close friends for the past twenty years or more have exactly the same questions about Warhol's intent and control as does the informed public.[47]

A series of artists have followed Duchamp, Beuys, and Warhol, in skillfully creating ambiguous personas that reinforce the impact of their provocative, and often shocking, conceptual innovations. Yves Klein (1928-62) was a contemporary of Warhol's. The poet and critic John Ashbery observed that "In his art and in his life, Klein was a perfect example of a poker face, or, as the French say, a *pince-sans-rire*. Needless to say, he was dismissed by conservative critics as a practical joker."[48] One of those critics, *The New York Times'* John

Canaday, observed of a retrospective of Klein's work in 1967, five years after the artist's death, that "The prodigious exaltation of nonsense is the really troubling thing about this exhibition." Canaday described Klein as "one of the truly great vaudevillians," and concluded that the artist "presented as liberations of the spirit a series of tricks that are more accurately interpretable as symptoms of art's mortal illness."[49]

Klein had a lifelong fascination with representations of space, and the infinite. In pursuit of transcending physical limitations, in 1958 he announced that "My paintings are now invisible and I would like to show them in a clear and positive manner, in my next Parisian exhibition at Iris Clert's."[50] Shortly thereafter Klein presented an exhibition, titled "The Void," at Clert's gallery. Klein painted the gallery's walls white, and emptied it of all its furniture. For the exhibition's opening, the front door was flanked by two Republican Guards in full dress uniform, which usually signified a formal state event. On the appointed evening, the otherwise empty gallery was packed with invited guests, and a crowd of several thousand people outside were unable to enter. Critical reactions to the exhibition varied widely, from one review that compared the gallery to a "freshly lime-washed cowshed" to another that characterized the gallery as "a void to fill with dreams."[51] Klein considered the show a great success, and during the next four years he presented several other public displays of the void.

Nor did Klein stop with exhibitions, for in 1959 he began to sell the void. He created receipts for what he called *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility*, and offered them at prices ranging from 20-160 grams of gold. Purchasers were offered the option of keeping the receipts or, to realize the "authentic immaterial value" of the work, of purchasing and then burning them. In the latter case, Klein would throw half the gold he had received into an ocean or river. At least

three of these ritual transfers took place in 1962 in Paris, on the banks of the Seine. A purchaser who participated in one of these ritual transfers of immateriality, which were performed formally and solemnly, later wrote that he had had "no other experience in art equal to the depth of feeling of [the sale ceremony]. It evoked in me a shock of self-recognition and an explosion of awareness of time and space."[52]

Throughout his career, Klein devised a number of ways to create paintings that were not the direct product of the artist's hand. These included making nude models into "living brushes," by having them cover themselves with blue paint and then press themselves against canvases tacked to the wall or laid on the floor; driving his car on a highway with a canvas covered with wet paint tied to the roof; and scorching patterns into canvases with blow torches. All of these techniques stemmed from his belief in the immaterial and conceptual nature of art: "True 'painters and poets' don't paint and don't write poems."[53]

After Klein's premature death, critics debated the meaning of his art. A French admirer, Pierre Restany, declared that "His career was marked by conquest stages that are practically myths incarnated in deeds."[54] Harold Rosenberg described Klein as "a highly inventive showman." Rosenberg concluded that "Klein's talent lay neither in his works nor in the originality of his ideas but in his way of staging them and himself."[55] Interestingly, in spite of his dismissal of Klein's art, Rosenberg accurately identified a key element of his impact on the art of the 1960s, for Klein's flamboyant staging of his exhibitions and the execution of his works became one of his legacies for artists who would be increasingly interested in the relationship between performance and art objects.

During the early 1960s, the Italian conceptual artist Piero Manzoni (1933-63) made a

series of works that explored issues similar to those of Klein, including the void and the physical relationship of the artist to his work. In 1998, Julia Peyton-Jones observed that "commentators have positioned Manzoni as an artist who continues to shock, 35 years after his death... Manzoni's audacity has placed him among the *enfants terribles* even of our own time."[56]

In 1961 Manzoni created *Magic Base*: "as long as any person or any object stayed on this base he, or it, was a work of art." Later the same year, Manzoni made the *Base of the World*, a large iron pedestal turned upside down in a Danish park that made the whole world a work of art.[57] Also in 1961 Manzoni began making human beings into works of art by signing them. These "living sculptures" were given receipts by Manzoni specifying whether the whole person or only the body part signed by him was a work of art, and whether they were art at all times or only during certain activities.

Manzoni's most provocative work was the production of a series of 90 small cans, each numbered and signed by the artist, titled *Merda d'artista*, with labels in four languages reading "Contents: 30 gr. net; freshly preserved; produced and tinned in May 1961." Manzoni sold these cans at prices equal to the current market value of 30 grams of gold.[58] Richard Cork later wrote of Manzoni's attitude in producing these works:

> An instinctive showman, Manzoni played the part of artistic insurgent with relish. He even posed for a photograph, canned shit in hand, next to a lavatory bowl. A puckish grin animates his plump face, and his eyes gleam in brazen defiance of all those who dismissed him as a charlatan.[59]

The *Merda d'artista* have raised a series of questions that have fueled debate ever since Manzoni's premature death. From one vantage point, they are demonstrations that carry to an extreme the Duchampian proposition that anything so designated by the artist can be a work of

art - not only clean and aesthetically attractive manufactured objects, but even the most taboo waste product of the human body. The commercial language of the label presents the can's contents as a consumer item, but it cannot be consumed. Indeed, there is a persistent debate about what the cans actually contain. Manzoni made the cans by himself, in a secluded place, and a recent survey of owners of the cans found considerable disagreement over whether they really contain the material described on their labels. Because Manzoni sealed the cans, it is generally accepted that opening one destroys it as a work of art, so the debate over what is inside them cannot be settled.[60]

In 2004, Jeremy Lewison, the director of acquisitions for the Tate Modern in London, explained his museum's purchase of a *Merda d'artista* by saying that "From our point of view, this is already a classic work of art." Interestingly, Lewison also remarked that "we wanted to complement our Manzoni collection and continue to build it up, just as we have recently been building up our Duchamp collection."[61] In 2003 no. 77 of *Merda d'artista* was sold at a London auction for $27,000. Manzoni had implicitly compared himself to an alchemist in his original pricing of these works, but their subsequent appreciation to values much greater than that of gold reflected the inspiration they provided to the younger Italian Arte Povera artists in the late 1960s for their aggressive use of unconventional materials in making art. Manzoni had written in 1957 that the common problem of misunderstanding that faced contemporary art was a consequence of the artist's need to be "the herald of ... new human conditions; he discovers new totems and taboos latent in his time but not yet recognized, combining them in a new civilization."[62] Whether *Merda d'artista* was seriously intended to be an element of a new civilization, and whether it has become such an element, continue to be debated today.

In 1969, Gilbert Proesch (1943-) and George Pasmore (1942-), who work professionally as Gilbert & George, declared themselves to be living sculptures. In their first notable work, they painted their faces and hands bronze and sang "Underneath the Arches," a music hall song, for eight hours at a stretch for two consecutive days. Since then, they have made works in a variety of media, many involving photographs of themselves and others naked, and many using profane titles and written texts to make jarring and obscene statements about sex, religion, race, and other subjects that arise in the course of their daily lives in London. They were awarded the third annual Turner Prize in 1986, and the description of their work on that occasion began by observing that "Gilbert and George have constantly attempted to address themes and subjects from human experience in such a way that their work would be accessible to untutored audiences."[63]

In 2000, Louisa Buck noted that although Gilbert and George, together with only David Hockney and Damien Hirst, are probably Britain's best-known living artists, mixed feelings persist about them, because of a basic ambiguity concerning their work and lives: "Is their fused artistic persona an ongoing continuation of their 1960s decision to become 'Living Sculpture,' or an attention-seeking joke at the world's expense?"[64] Although the two often appear in public, and have given extensive interviews, they never appear out of character, which includes their trademark matching tweed suits and their formal and paradoxical statements about themselves and their art. Thus the critic Matthew Collings wrote that:

> Ever since they started, people would ask if they really were like the way they behaved publicly. Their funny, stiff, upright manner and stiff suits. Didn't they drop the act in private, or when they were among friends? But they never do drop the act, and they really are sincere artists, although it's hard to know why that's

> good. I mean they really are good but it's hard to explain how being sincere and totally made-up at the same time can work, and why that should result in excellence.[65]

Buck pointed to the same issue by comparing the British artists to an earlier figure in the lineage of conceptual tricksters: "In a career spanning some thirty years, the living logo that is G & G has followed in the footsteps of Andy Warhol in achieving the three-way formula for contemporary artistic success: ubiquity, inscrutability and - above all - controversy."[66] David Sylvester's analysis of Gilbert and George referred back to an earlier artistic ancestor. Reflecting that the mystery surrounding their partnership makes their art problematic, he observed that "Not the least problematic element is the question whether G&G's 'real' work is the corpus of their artefacts or is the living sculpture," then remarked that "It was surely Marcel Duchamp who first invented that problem of where the real work lay... Gilbert and George, like Duchamp, never forget the importance of keeping us guessing." But Sylvester was at pains not to trivialize the art of Gilbert and George, or of their forerunner, as he immediately proceeded to discuss "the risk that I have been making G&G and Duchamp himself sound like smart alecs rather than seriously subversive artists who take serious chances."[67]

In a typical statement, in 1986 Gilbert and George elaborated on their motto, "Art for All," declaring that "We want Our Art to speak across the barriers of knowledge directly to People about their Life and not about their knowledge of art." They have consistently denounced modern art: "The twentieth century has been cursed with an art that cannot be understood."[68] Because of this, they stress that their own art avoids traditional artistry in favor of ideas: "You don't see the brush strokes, the handwritten message that every artist is so proud of. We always said that we wanted to make pictures that shoot from the brain like a laser."[69] Their views on art

history are xenophobic, as they scorn "Monet or Manet or these lock-jaw names. Disgusting. Art from wine-growing countries." They want their art to break with tradition: "We would like very much to make an art that has nothing to do with the art world, just with the public."[70] And they consistently profess their sincerity: "I'll tell you where there's irony in our work: nowhere, nowhere, nowhere. Every time we see that word in an article about us we go to the dictionary and I still don't understand the bloody meaning of the word. And we hate it."[71]

Louisa Buck observed that "From the beginning of their joint career, Gilbert and George have deliberately embraced extremes of tastelessness. But they've always made a point of combining outrage with ambiguity. Often, the more crudely shocking the content, the more complex the reading."[72] Their iconoclastic stance, with its emphasis on embracing the daily life of the city, has made Gilbert and George a role model for many of the successful young British artists who have become prominent in the past decade. Thus Julian Stallabrass explained that "Gilbert and George were important examples in their manipulation and provocation of the media, their ambivalent attitude to political correctness (highly conservative in their image and their statements but not above complaining of gay-bashing when they were attacked for those views), in their overt populism and in the performative aspect of their art."[73] The most successful of all of these younger artists, Damien Hirst, cited Gilbert and George as proof of the bias of the contemporary art world: "I can't help thinking if Gilbert and George were American, they'd be much more significant." [74]

In 1988, the critic Peter Schjeldahl wrote: "Jeff Koons makes me sick. He may be the definitive artist of this moment, and that makes me sickest."[75] In 2004, Arthur Danto observed that "It is widely acknowledged that Jeff Koons is among the most important artists of the last

decades of the twentieth century." Yet, Danto continued, if there were a poll of critics and other art experts, "we would encounter a fair amount of resistance to the idea that Koons is anything more than a clever opportunist who has pulled the wool over the rest of the Art World's eyes." Danto understood what this meant: "That by itself would be evidence of his importance."[76]

The phases of Koons' career are well known in the art world, from the Hoover vacuums in plexiglass cases of the early 1980s, through the floating basketballs in tanks of the mid-'80s, the manufactured porcelain statues of the late '80s, the explicit photographs of Koons having sex with La Cicciolina, the Italian star of adult films who was then his wife, in the early '90s, to the large composite paintings of recent years. Koons greatly admires Andy Warhol, and his attitudes and practices follow Warhol in a number of respects. Among these is his use of artisans and assistants to execute his works. In 1999, for example, Koons produced a series of seven paintings, each 3 by 4.3 meters in size, for an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in Berlin. He began each by using a computer to create a composite image from photographs he had taken from magazines and books. The resulting computer image was then made into a slide, which was projected onto a canvas, on which it was traced. In rushing to meet the deadline for the Berlin show, Koons had a total of 47 artists painting, in shifts, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.[77] The statues which are among Koons' most famous works (including the nearly 6-foot long ceramic portrayal of Michael Jackson and his pet chimpanzee, Bubbles, which sold at auction in 2001 for $5.6 million) are made by craftsmen in France, Germany and Italy.[78]

Koons has complemented his works with statements that are striking in their simplicity and apparent ingenuousness. He openly admits his interest in publicity: "I want to have an impact in people's lives. I want to communicate to as wide a mass as possible." Subtlety was not an

element in achieving this: “My art has always used sex as a direct communication line to the viewer.”[79] He embraces commercial success: “the seriousness with which a work of art is taken is interrelated to the value it has. The market is the greatest critic.”[80] He does not feign modesty: “I’m making some of the greatest art being made now... In [the 20th century] there was Picasso and Duchamp. Now I’m taking us out of the twentieth century.” He does not claim artistic sophistication: “My work has no aesthetic values... I believe that taste is really unimportant.” And he stresses that his work has no hidden meanings: “A viewer might at first see irony in my work, but I see none at all. Irony causes too much critical contemplation.” His commitment to his art is complete: “My art and my life are totally one.”[81] Irving Sandler compared Koons’ behavior to that of a predecessor: “Koons spun a web of words around his vacuum cleaner - and all of his subsequent - works, explicating them in an utterly serious and seemingly candid manner in frequent public appearances. Like Warhol he can be considered as much a performance artist as a producer of art objects.”[82]

Critics have long puzzled over Koons’ work, and his persona. In 1988, Schjeldahl asked: “So who is the joke on? Is Koons playing the fool for his audience or making fools of them? It’s useless to ask, because his irony isn’t a vector but a spiral, showing a special smirk to every available point of view.”[83] In 2004, Danto traced Koons’ artistic genealogy: “The conceptual development of art from Duchamp through Warhol to Koons is like the punctuated evolution of science from Galileo through Newton to Einstein.” Danto recognized that Koons owed the basis of his artistic existence to these forebears: “Koons has found a way of making high art out of low art - but in a way that would not have been a possibility until the conceptual revolutions of Duchamp and Warhol.”[84] Koons embraced a similar genealogy in the course of explaining why

he was not troubled by the negative judgments of his work by the critic Hilton Kramer: "I always know everything's OK when Hilton attacks me because in the same breath he always attacks my heroes. He says Jeff Koons had to occur since Jasper Johns painted his American flag. And the flag couldn't have occurred without Duchamp. And after Johns it was Andy... That sounds wonderful to me - Duchamp, Johns, Andy Warhol. Such good company!"[85] Like Duchamp and Warhol before him Koons has influenced younger artists not only by producing new forms of art, but by creating a living model for an artist's behavior. So for example not only do Damien Hirst's famous steel and glass cases, that contain a variety of household objects and dead animals, owe a direct debt to Koons' many sealed cases, but Hirst has explained that he admires Koons for deliberately constructing "Jeff Koons, the Artist."[86] It is also very likely that Hirst has taken to heart another of Koons' aphorisms: "The trick is to be outrageous but not offensive."[87]

The art historian David Cottington wrote in 2005 that "Perhaps more than any other contemporary artist, Tracey Emin has come to stand in Warhol's footsteps, occupying the space of artist-celebrity that he carved out for himself, but also developing it in significant respects."[88] A frequent observation about the young British artists, of whom Emin is a prominent member, is that their art deals with contemporary life.[89] In Emin's case, the life in question is her own:

> Emin's exclusive subject matter is her personal life, and that life, as read off from the art, has included underage sex, rape, abortion, bouts of serious depression and long periods of drunkenness... Most famously, Emin made a tent, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With (1963-1995)*, the inside of which is covered with numerous sewn dedications to lovers, her twin brother and grandmother, a teddy bear and her aborted foetus.[90]

Her presentation of her life is obviously subjective: "in her published statements, as in her works of art, there is a continual slippage between memories of an event and poetic imagining. Her

eccentricities and the awkwardness of her expression assure her viewers that the art is authentic and sincere."[91] Emin denies any ironic intent: "Everything that I do is totally sincere."[92]

Early in her career Emin was known for boorishness, and for her liberal use of profanity at drunken public appearances, but Matthew Collings observed in 2001 that her image had become more nuanced:

> Recently public feeling toward Emin has changed slightly from loving to loathe her, to loving to love her. She is still a by-word for artistic charlatanism, and TV and radio personalities will never miss a chance to curry favor by sneering at her. But somehow she's become a by-word for public outbreaks of sentimentalism as well - the nation seems to be able to cope with the contradiction... [Y]ou can hardly get past two or three short paragraphs [of newspaper articles about her] before the writer will be blubbing like crazy, out of a sense of identification with Emin's pain, and the pain of international women; and referring to her as "Tracey" or "Trace," or the favorite - "our Trace."[93]

Cottington observed that "like Warhol, Emin appears to use ambiguity as a strategy." He noted that although "her work gives a first impression of a self-absorption, clamor for attention, and a desire to shock that are naïve and even childish," in fact her art makes informed and sophisticated references to both earlier art and popular culture. In a number of works, Emin also alludes to her own celebrity, and to the popular image of herself as a drunken and sexually liberated wild child. Cottington pointed out that this creates a basic ambiguity: "Emin's work both is and is not what it appears at first sight to be. It *is* all those things 'we' see on first impression, but it is *also* the reputation that inescapably accompanies each exhibition of it, brought by its audiences, as well as the mechanisms - above all, of 'celebrity' - by which that reputation is produced and sustained." [94]

When Damien Hirst won the Turner Prize in 1995, an English critic denounced him as a

trickster: " If Damien Hirst is anything, he is the ring-master of his own career - on to his next trick, his next sensation, before the audience starts to think. There are the freak shows of the animals, the jolly paintings, his beaming self."[95] On the same occasion, another critic hailed Hirst as an artist for the ages: "Hirst's work acknowledges a buried sense of loss and longing for completeness that some psychoanalysts believe is universal."[96] Virginia Button summed up the debate, observing that "There seemed to be no middle ground as far as critical response to Hirst's work was concerned: was he a contemporary genius or arch hoaxer intent on conning the public?"[97]

Hirst is the most flamboyant of the young British artists who became a powerful force in contemporary art during the 1990s. In 1988, when he was still a student at Goldsmiths' College, Hirst curated *Freeze*, the first of what became a series of group exhibitions of the work of many of his fellow students held in an empty warehouse in London's Docklands, that has become legendary as the public debut of many of the leading members of the group. In 1991, on a commission from the collector and dealer Charles Saatchi, Hirst made perhaps his most famous work, a 14-foot tiger shark suspended in a formaldehyde solution that he titled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living.*

Hirst is widely recognized as the leader of what many consider the most vibrant art movement of the past two decades. As the American critic Jerry Saltz observed in 2000, "Ask anyone on the London scene, 'Did Damien set this in motion? Is he one of the reasons for the new Tate?' and you'll see how much influence he's had. He's their prophet and deliverer, their Elvis and ayatollah."[98] Hirst's critical reputation in England is such that a *Financial Times* columnist could recently compare him to the greatest artist of the past century, seriously posing

the question "Will Damien Hirst, the one-time *enfant terrible* of 'Brit art,' be seen in the same light as Picasso by 2050?"[99] His success in the market is hardly less impressive. A work of Hirst surpassed $2 million at auction in 2004, and in 2005 a front-page story in the *New York Times* reported that *The Physical Impossibility* had been sold privately to an American collector for $8 million.[100] Hirst announced in the spring of 2006 that his next project, to be displayed at a new London gallery in 2007, will consist of a human skull cast in platinum, completely encased in diamonds. He will collaborate with a London jeweller on the project, which will use 8,500 diamonds, and will cost an estimated £8-10 million to produce. *The Observer* reported that the work, to be titled *For the Love of God*, will be the most expensive work of art ever created, and that the asking price may be as much as £50 million. Hirst described the work as a celebration of life and a defiance of death: "I've always adhered to the principle that the simplest ideas are the best, and this will be the ultimate two fingers up to death."[101]

Hirst is a celebrity. In 2000, Louisa Buck observed that "Such is Damien Hirst's current status that it wouldn't really affect his reputation if he gave up making art altogether."[102] Julian Stallabrass remarked that "Hirst is as much or more known for his lifestyle as for his art, and he takes care to ensure that the two are thoroughly entangled." Observing that Hirst's work is "spectacular and attention-seeking," Stallabrass argued that:

> This courting of publicity was cloaked with an all-knowing irony... A facile postmodernism, the basis for a ubiquitous irony, was the foundation of this new art, one which took no principle terribly seriously. The new art would be quite as dreadful as the philistines said it was... but this time deliberately so: it would use the philistines' energy and power in the mass media against them.[103]

Hirst has readily conceded that he welcomes public attention: "As an artist, you have a

desire to communicate an idea to a hell of a lot of people on a massive scale." Yet he denies that he has created a new persona to gain fame: "I'm not prepared to do that." Interestingly, however, Hirst declared that he admired Jeff Koons for doing just this, explaining that "he actually made a concerted effort to do it as part of his art." Hirst admired Koons' sacrifice: "he gave up his life to become his own idea of himself." But Hirst condemned the hypocrisy of other artists who denied they had become actors in order to gain success: "What I hate is a hell of a lot of artists who I know, who are alive, have done that and won't admit it." Hirst did not believe this applied to him, and in fact he maintained that he did not feel famous: "I just think everyone's famous, but not me."[104]

Arthur Danto noted that Hirst has been called the "hooligan genius" of British art, but defended his art on conceptual grounds:

> Putting a huge fish in a large tank of formaldehyde sounds easy enough... But *imagining* doing it requires a degree of artistic intuition of a very rare order, since one would have to anticipate what it would look like and what effect it would have on the viewer. The work in fact has the power, sobriety, and majesty of a cathedral.[105]

Louisa Buck stressed the two sides of Hirst: "being a dab-hand at spectacle and having an engaging way with the popular has also concealed Hirst's ability to be a serious - and in many ways, traditional - artist who knows art history well enough to employ a keen formalism and sense of scale, and who still believes that art should grapple with the hefty issues of what it is to be human, to live and to face death."[106] Matthew Collings commented on Hirst's shrewd cultivation of his public image:

> In interviews, he acts like a mad genius-artist. The media assume this is the only way a modern genius-artist can possibly behave.

> They take it for granted it's a mark of his genius that he actually does behave like that. So you've got to admit he's got a good sense of the media and he understands how that mind set works, although you might still question it that's really such an amazing achievement for an artist. He never actually says anything genuinely compromising or revealing, but we're all supposed to be amazed at his shocking candor anyway.[107]

As early as 1995, David Sylvester identified Hirst's ancestry: "Duchamp ... has been the veritable patron saint of the most conspicuous art made since the mid-1960s (Damien Hirst is an obvious example)."[108] Louisa Buck pointed to another of his ancestors: "Hirst doesn't make great claims for his art: like a true child of Warhol he professes to be happy with any response."[109]

Consequences

> I've played my part as artistic clown.
>
> Marcel Duchamp, 1957[110]

During the course of the past century, a series of important artistic innovators have been accused of being tricksters: their major works have shocked many viewers, have often been considered tasteless or vulgar, and have been judged by many to be jokes. In many cases, these artists' silence or deadpan denials that their works are jokes has led to extended and often heated debate over whether the works are serious contributions. Art scholars and critics who have studied these artists have frequently concluded that their behavior is deliberate. In this view, the artists have employed a strategy in which an initial radical contribution that has provoked widespread criticism, and often outrage, is followed either by the artist's refusal to defend the work, or by statements in its defense that are obviously ironic. The result of this strategy has been to create a basic ambiguity, and the degree of its success can be measured by the number of admirers and detractors who subsequently become engaged in the debate over the significance of

the work in question. In every such case, a key element of this debate has concerned the motives and sincerity of the artist.

The strategy of the artist as trickster is a twentieth-century innovation. A number of artists in earlier centuries were accused of perpetrating hoaxes, but these accusations generally failed to generate sustained interest or discussion, typically because they were clearly false. As a young artist, Marcel Duchamp learned a series of lessons that led him to devise this strategy, and his behavior made him a prototype for a number of later artists.

The provocative nature of the trickster model, and the importance of Duchamp, Beuys, Warhol, and the other artists treated in this paper, has generated considerable attention from art scholars, and there now exist many detailed analyses of the behavior of each of these artists. As is frequently the case in the humanities, however, there has been a failure to generalize about this behavior. Thus although studies of artists like Klein or Manzoni virtually always mention Duchamp as a predecessor, these references are usually cursory, and the bulk of the analysis devoted to the artist in question inevitably considers that artist's behavior in isolation. A consequence of this is that although we have dozens of monographic studies of the individual artists treated in this paper, we do not have a single study of the general model of the behavior of the artist as trickster. Because the many instances of this behavior have not been linked to all the others, there has been a failure to appreciate how important this model has been overall to the art of the twentieth century. This paper has obviously not considered all the cases of this behavior, but the nine instances examined here are all major modern artists, and clearly demonstrate how central the model has been to the art of the past century.

A number of common features of this behavior have often been overlooked. One, noted

above, is that this behavior is a new phenomenon in the twentieth century. Another is that the behavior has been restricted to conceptual innovators. Radical conceptual innovators are iconoclasts, and they are usually young when they make their most important contributions. Duchamp and his followers have taken advantage of their youth, often feigning naivete and ignorance of tradition to heighten the public image of them as brash, arrogant, and impudent. And the large conceptual component of their innovations has made ambiguity a particularly powerful tool. Thus just as the Futurists discovered that written manifestos, containing complex intellectual rationales for their conceptual art works, could be valuable tools in increasing the audience for those works, so the trickster conceptual innovators of the past century recognized that ambiguity, and the debate that it produced over the meaning and sincerity of their works, could be attractive accompaniments to their works for many critics and collectors.

The model of the artist as trickster has effectively made the work of art inseparable from the personality of the artist. Prior to Duchamp, many art scholars studied the ideas and attitudes of artists in order to illuminate the meaning of their art, but many others considered this unnecessary, on the grounds that the significance of the work of art was embodied in the work itself. From Duchamp on, the work of the trickster artists effectively eliminated the latter option. With Duchamp, Beuys, Warhol, and their trickster peers, we can never look at their work without thinking not only of their ideas - what is the artistic significance of a manufactured object purchased at a hardware store, or a silkscreen of a photograph taken from a magazine - but also of their attitudes - was *Fountain* or *Fat Chair* really intended to be taken seriously? In this sense, the model of the trickster has produced a type of conceptual art that is more personal than most other forms of art.

Late in his life, Marcel Duchamp gave a lecture titled “The Creative Act.” He reflected that “art history has consistently decided upon the virtues of a work of art through considerations completely divorced from the rationalized explanations of the artist.” Ultimately, he concluded that the reason for this was that “the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”[111] In the final chapter of a recent monograph on Duchamp, three art scholars observe that with this formulation “Duchamp strikes at the heart of the modernist idea of the self-sufficiency of the work of art, its immutable and independent quality, in his ideas about the spectator, who, for him, is the other pole of the creation of art.” With undisguised admiration, the three close the chapter by reflecting that Duchamp’s emphasis on the importance of the spectator is a form of “abnegation” or “self-effacement as an artist.”[112] What the three fail to notice, however, is that the behavior described in this paper can be seen as a clever way for the artist to reverse the circumstance identified in Duchamp’s lecture, that “the artist... plays no role at all in the judgment of his own work.”[113] For when the viewer stands before the work of the trickster artist, perhaps to a greater extent than for any earlier art the viewer’s critical reaction is dominated by the effort to analyze the artist’s intentions. Ever the master of irony, Duchamp appears to have devised a way of manipulating the spectator’s judgment that is neither abnegating nor self-effacing, for even decades after his death Duchamp is present whenever a viewer confronts his art, wondering whether he was serious or joking, and having to consider that perhaps he was both.

Footnotes

I thank Robert Jensen for discussions of the issues treated in this paper, and John McEnroe for the title.

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