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MARCEL DUCHAMP AND THE REFUSAL OF WORK

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"You cannot afford to be a young man who doesn't do a thing. Who doesn't work? You can't live without working, which is a terrible thing. I remember a book called *The Right to Be Lazy*: that right doesn't exist now."

"You prefer life to the work of the artist?" "Yes," Marcel replied.

Marcel Duchamp remarks somewhere that while "John Cage boasts of having introduced silence into music, I'm proud of having celebrated laziness in art."[1] Duchamp's "great laziness" shook the art world more radically and durably than the profusion of activity of a Picasso with his 50,000 works.

Duchamp maintained an obstinate refusal of both artistic and wage-earning work, refusing to submit to the functions, roles, and norms of capitalist society. He did more than challenge the definitions of art and the artist.

Inasmuch as his refusal differs from the 1960s Italian Operaist "refusal of work," Duchamp helps us to understand the insistent refusals voiced in the streets and city squares around the world since 2008 (in Turkey, Brazil, Spain, the US, and elsewhere).

On the one hand, Duchamp extends his refusal beyond the standard definitions of work to encompass not only paid labor but every function and role society assigns (woman/man, consumer, user, unemployed, etc.). Like the vast majority of roles and functions, the artist is not bound to an employer but to a range of apparatuses of power. As "human capital," which the artist himself has ironically come to epitomize under neoliberalism, he too must submit to "external" powers as well as to the hold over his "ego" (a creative ego assigned to the human capital of artist and entrepreneur alike, one which instills in both the illusion of being free).

On the other hand, Duchamp encourages us to conceive of and exercise a "refusal of work" which constitutes an ethical-political principle that goes beyond work, which frees us from the enchanted circle of production, productivity, and producers. This stands in contrast to the communist tradition, in which the notion of work has always been at once the strength and the weakness. Is the objective emancipation from work or emancipation through it? Nothing has resolved the confusion.

The workers' *movement* existed only because the strike is simultaneously a renunciation, a *non-movement*, a radical

désoeuvrement,[2] an unworking or inaction, and a suspension of production which interrupt the roles, functions, and hierarchies of the factory's division of labor. Problematizing a sole aspect of the struggle—"movement"—proved a major obstacle from the start because it made the workers' movement a catalyst of productivism and industrialization and turned workers into eulogists of their own enslavement. With neoliberalism, the flip side of the struggle—the "refusal of work," non-movement, or inaction—has either been ignored or inadequately problematized.

The refusal of work has thus always referred to something else, to politics in the guise of the party or State. Instead, Duchamp asks us to hold with the refusal itself, with non-movement and demobilization. He invites us to develop and experiment with all the possibilities that "lazy action" creates in order to carry out a reconversion of subjectivity, to invent new techniques of existence and new ways of living time. Feminist movements, by refusing to exercise the functions—and work of—"women," have in general followed this strategy rather than the classical political one. However, the anthropology of the workers' refusal remains by and large an anthropology of work; class subjectivation remains always that of "workers" and "producers." Laziness points to an entirely different anthropology and to an ethics of a completely different kind. By undermining the very foundations of "work," laziness not only thwarts "producer" identities, it undoes sexual identities as

well. The anthropology of modernity itself—the subject and individual "man," the freedom and universality of "man"—is consequently put into question.

The communist movement had the opportunity, however, to create an anthropology and ethics whose aim was not a present dominated by hard work. It could have invented processes of subjectivation that weren't centered on producers. In *The Right to Be Lazy* (1880), written as a refutation of Louis Blanc's "right to work," Paul Lafargue drew inspiration from the *otium* of classical antiquity. It was precisely the latter that the communists should have considered in light of slavery's democratization through waged labor. But they failed to see what Marx's son-in-law Lafargue had rediscovered, namely, the ontological and political implications inherent in the suspension of activity and authority. They thus missed the chance to move beyond the model of *homo faber*, beyond the vainglorious producer and the promethean promise of mastery over nature that the model implies. Duchamp, on the other hand, exploited the radicality of inactivity. For the right to be lazy, "a right, without your having to give an account or an exchange," challenges the three mainstays of capitalist society. First of all, laziness undermines exchange: "who invented the concept of exchanging? Why should one exchange on even terms?"[3] "In today's society it's become a law, with gendarmes enforcing relationships between individuals." Second, and still more profoundly, laziness threatens property, the bedrock of exchange: "For that

matter, possession—the idea of exchange presupposes possession in the proprietary sense of the word."[4] Finally, laziness undercuts the primacy of labor. For Marx, labor is the living basis of property because property is nothing other than objectivized work. If you want to deal a mortal blow to property, says Marx, you have to attack it not only as an objective condition but also as an activity, as work. The right to laziness, on the other hand, subverts, one by one, exchange, property, and work and does so outside the Marxist tradition.

1. The Refusal of (Artistic) Work

Duchampian laziness lends itself to two readings. It represents a socio-economic critique and at the same time constitutes a "philosophical" category. It discloses new dimensions of existence and new forms of life which compel us to rethink action, time, and subjectivity.

Let us start with the socio-economic critique. Laziness is not simply a "non-action" or a "minimal-action." It involves taking a position with respect to the conditions of existence under capitalism. First of all, it affirms a subjective refusal of (paid) work and of all the forms of conformist behavior capitalist society demands. It is a rejection of "all those little rules that dictate you won't get food if you don't show signs of activity or production of some kind." Beuys denounced Duchamp's "overrated silence"[5] on social and political issues; and most critics of

Duchamp find in him no lack of contradictions. He himself for that matter admitted he never stopped contradicting himself in order to avoid getting stuck in established systems, tastes, and thought. But if there is something that systematically reappears and to which he remains faithful throughout his life, it is his refusal of work and his commitment to lazy action. Together they make up the common ethical-political threads of his existence.

> Might it be possible to live as a mere occupant, paying nothing and possessing nothing? [...] This brings us back to the right to laziness suggested by Paul Lafargue in a book that really struck me around 1912. It still seems to me today quite legitimate to challenge the forced labor that even newborns are subjected to.[6]

No generation in the history of humanity has sacrificed so much time to work than those generations whose misfortune it has been to be born under capitalism. Capitalism has condemned humanity to forced labor, regardless of the level of productivity achieved. Rather than freeing us from work, every technical, social, and scientific innovation has only tightened its control over temporality.

> I'm no fascist, but I think democracy hasn't brought us much of anything rational. [...] It's shameful we're still obliged to work simply in order to survive [...], obliged to work to exist—it really is a disgrace.[7]

The Home for the Lazy ("Home for Adult Lazies / Orphanage for Young Lazies") Duchamp wanted to open, where "The stipulation would be that you cannot work,"[8] presupposes a reconversion of subjectivity and work on the self, because laziness represents a different way of inhabiting time and the world.

"In any case, I'm sure there wouldn't be as many residents as one might imagine" since, "in fact, it really isn't easy to be truly lazy and do nothing."[9] Despite living an extremely austere existence in circumstances at times dire, Duchamp was able to get by without working because he benefited from small advances on a family inheritance, the occasional assistance of rich bourgeois collectors, small transactions in artwork, and other arrangements, none of which, however, could be regularly depended upon. Duchamp was therefore quite aware of the impossibility of leading a "lazy" life without a radical transformation of society.

> God knows there's enough food for everybody on earth, without having to work for it. [...] And don't ask me who will make the bread or anything, because there is enough vitality in man in general that he cannot stay lazy. There would be very few lazies in my home, because they couldn't stand to be lazy too long. In such a society barter would not exist, and the great people would be the garbage collectors. It would be the highest and noblest form of activity. [...] I am afraid it's a bit like communism,

but it is not. I am seriously and very much from a capitalist country.[10]

Art is just as much a part of the social division of labor as any other activity. From this point of view, being an artist is a profession or a specialization like any other. It is precisely the requirement that one occupy a place, a role, and an identity with one's body and soul that was the object of Duchamp's permanent, categorical refusal. In the artist's case, however, only the techniques of subordination were different since, from early on, they were no longer solely disciplinary in nature. Now the techniques of Control Societies in general are as much if not more "chronophagic" than disciplinary just as in artistic activity.

"There is no time to make very fine work. The pace of production is such that it becomes another kind of race," part of society's generalized rat race.[11] Artworks "have to be slowly produced. I don't believe in [the] speed in artistic production" introduced by capitalism.[12] Teeny Duchamp, his second wife, recounts that "he didn't work like a laborer" but alternated between short periods of work and long breaks: "I couldn't work more than two hours a day [...]. Even today I can't work more than two hours a day. It's really something to work every day."[13]

More generally, the refusal of "artistic" work means refusing to produce for the market and collectors in order to meet the aesthetic demands of an ever-expanding public.

It means refusing to submit to their standards of evaluation and their demand for "quantity" and "quality."

> The danger is falling into the capitalist ranks, of making a comfortable living in a genre of painting one recopies till the end of one's days.[14]

Duchamp very precisely and trenchantly describes the artist's integration into the capitalist economy and the transformation of art into a commodity: "you buy art the way you buy spaghetti."

In 1963 William Seitz asked Duchamp if he thought the artist had compromised himself under capitalism. "It's a capitulation. It seems today that the artist couldn't survive if he didn't swear allegiance to the good old mighty dollar. That shows how far the integration has gone."[15]

Integration into capitalism is also and above all subjective. Even if the artist, unlike the factory work, has no direct boss, he is nonetheless subject to apparatuses of power which do more than merely define the space in which he produces; they determine the composition of subjectivity. In the 1980s the artist became the model of "human capital" because he embodied the "freedom" to create.

> Courbet was the first to say "accept my art or don't accept it. I'm free." This was in 1860. Since then every artist has had the feeling that he must be still freer than the last. The Pointillists freer than the

> Impressionists, the Cubists freer still, and the Futurists and Dadaists, and so forth. Freer, freer, and more free—they call that freedom. Why should the artist's ego be allowed to drain and poison the atmosphere?[16]

Once liberated from the orders of the king or lord, the artist considers himself free whereas he merely goes from one form of subordination to another. The artist, like the factory worker, is deprived of his "know-how" as production becomes standardized; he loses all singularity, even in painting.

> Since the creation of a market in painting, everything in the art world has changed dramatically. Look at how they produce. Do you honestly believe they like it, that they enjoy painting fifty times, a hundred times, the same thing? Not a bit. They don't make paintings, they make paychecks.[17]

Duchamp affirmed his refusal unequivocally: "I refuse to be an artist in the way it's meant today"; "I wanted to completely transform attitudes toward the artist"; "I've really tried to kill the little god the artist has become over the last century"; "You know, I never wanted to be an artist," etc.

The refusal of "artistic" work is not a simple opposition. It is not the negation of a pair of interdependent

terms (art/non-art) opposed by the very fact of their resemblance.

Duchamp is crystal clear on this point: his refusal eschews the Dadaist position which,

> in its opposition, became the other face of that which it opposed [...]. Literary Dada, a purely negative and accusatory phenomenon, gave too much credit to what we were determined to avoid. An example, if you want: with *3 Standard Stoppages* I was looking to give a different idea of the unity of length. I could have taken a measure of wood and broken it at a given point—that would have been Dada.[18]

Refusal opens to radical heterogeneity. Nothing is further from capitalist work than lazy action, whose actualization of political-existential potential subverts art as well as art's negation.

> I'm against the word "anti-," because it's a bit like "atheist" compared to "believer." An atheist is more or less as religious as a believer and an anti-artist more or less as artistic as an "artist." [...] "Anartist" would be a lot better, if I could change the term, than "anti-artist."[19]

While Duchamp rejected the injunction to be an artist (from 1923 he referred to himself as one "defrocked"

from art), he still never abandoned artistic practices, protocols, and procedures. The "anartist" demands that artistic functions and procedures be reconfigured. Such a delicate position locates the refusal of artistic work neither inside nor outside the institution of art but at its limit, its frontiers, and from this limit and these frontiers the refusal serves to remove the dialectical opposition between art and anti-art.

2. *Coffee Mill*: Between an Aesthetics of (Futurist) Movement and a Static (Cubist) Aesthetics

Let us now try to understand how lazy action and non-movement allow us to rethink action, time, and subjectivity.

Duchamp declared on numerous occasions the importance of the small *Coffee Mill* painted in 1911 ("You've said that the *Coffee Mill* is the key to all the rest of your work." Duchamp: "Yes [...]. It happened at the end of 1911"[20]). It permitted him very early on to leave the avant-gardes to which, in any case, he had never really belonged. Like many of his contemporaries, Duchamp was fascinated by movement and speed, the symbols of a roaring modernity.

Nude Descending a Staircase was meant to represent movement by drawing on Etienne Jules Marey's chrono-cinematographic techniques, and yet it represented movement only indirectly. With *Coffee Mill* Duchamp found a way past the opposition between movement—the Futurist's modernist celebration of movement—and the

static aesthetics of the Cubists ("They were proud to be static, too. They kept showing things from different facets, but that was not movement"[21]) through his discovery of a different dimension to movement and time.

Breaking up the coffee mill into its component parts, he introduced, in what art historians consider the first "machinist" canvas, the first diagrammatic sign in the history of painting: the arrow indicating the movement of the mechanism. "I did a description of the mechanism. You see the cogwheel, and you see the turning handle at the top, I also used the arrow showing the direction in which the hand turned [...]. It's not one moment; it's all the possibilities of the grinding machine. It's not like a drawing."[22] With this small painting Duchamp took a first step toward discovering not speed but possibility, not movement but becoming, not chronological time but the time of the event.

The possible, becoming, and the event open to "regions governed by neither time nor space," moving at different speeds (infinite speeds, Guattari would say) or at the greatest speed and the greatest slowness (Deleuze).

What philosophy, thanks to Bergson, was in the process of theorizing—the reversal of the subordination of time to movement—Duchamp discovered in creating this painting. Yet he added a fundamental condition until then neglected by philosophers: laziness as another way of experiencing time and lazy action as a new way of exploring the present as duration, possibility, and event.[23] For Deleuze, access to this temporality, to the movements that flow

from time, is the privilege of the "seer," for Duchamp, the privilege of the "lazy."

Duchamp always remained interested in "movement," although this new way of conceiving it would be, strictly speaking, unrepresentable. Duchamp described it only in the notes accompanying *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, which in fact constitute an integral part of the work:

> At each segment of duration all the future and past segments are reproduced [...]. All these past and future segments coexist, then, in a present that is no longer what one would ordinarily call the present instant but a kind of present of multiple lengths.[24]

Time is money, says the capitalist, "my capital isn't money, it's time," says Duchamp. And the time in question isn't the chronological time that can be measured and accumulated, but a present which, encompassing at once the past, the present, and the future, is the focal point of the production of the new. Looking back on the period in an interview in 1959, he proclaimed that "Movement is over, cubism is over." In his first readymade there was still movement but the turning bicycle wheel "was a movement that pleased me, like fire in a fireplace."[25] Sergei Eisenstein understood the kind of movement involved: "what can be more capable of expressing the dream of a fluid diversity of forms than fire?"[26] The attraction to fire lies in its "eternal

changeability, modularity, transformation from one thing to the next and the perpetual development of its images."[27]

Fire represents "an idiosyncratic protest against metaphysical inertness established once and for all."[28] "The rejection of the constraint of form, fixed once and for all, freedom from ossification, an ability to take on any form dynamically," which Eisenstein called "plasmasticity," perfectly matches Duchamp's thinking.[29]

Duchamp described the possibilities he discovered with *Coffee Mill* in another way: "The possible is an inframince."[30] Inframince is the dimension of the molecular, of small perceptions, of infinitesimal differences, of the cointelligence of contraries, where the laws of the macroscopic and, in particular, those of causality, of the logic of non-contradiction, of language and its generalizations, and of chronological time no longer hold. It is in inframince that becoming occurs, in the micro that changes take place. "The possible implies becoming—the passage from one to the other happens in inframince."[31]

Access to this dimension in every case depends on the same thing: another way of life, as "Lazy Inhabitants of the inframince."

The Readymade Is a Lazy Technique

The readymade is a lazy technique because it involves no virtuosity, no special know-how, no productive activity, and no manual labor. *Fountain*, *Bottle Rack*, or the snow

shovel—Duchamp simply picked them off "the shelf of the lazyman's hardware store"[32] where serial production and mass consumption had placed them.

With *Coffee Mill* Duchamp began to free himself from the creative subjectivity of the artist and the artist's techniques, employing industrial drawing to produce mechanomorphic works that bring together the traditional expertise of the artisan and the hypermodernity of machines. Made by a machine, the readymade "added to the impersonality."[33]

The readymade continues to surprise precisely because it continues to challenge our present actuality.

The simplest definition that Duchamp gave of the readymade is that it is "a work with no artist required to make it." It is above all an "act of defiance [...] an undeification" of the artist which lowers his "status in society instead of elevating him, of making him something sacred."[34]

There is no artist to express interiority, no creation to speak of, and the traditional role of the viewer is revoked: "the idea of contemplation completely disappears."[35]

Unlike modern-day capitalism, which requires creation everywhere only in order to stifle it, Duchamp mistrusted the concept of creation. The readymade flouts the celebration of artistic genius.

> I shy away from the word "creation." In the ordinary, social meaning of the word—well, it's very nice but, fundamentally, I don't believe in the creative function of the artist.[36]

Artistic Activity Is an Activity Like Any Other

The art market makes the act of creation the specificity of artistic production. Its value is determined by scarcity, by the uniqueness and originality of the creator.

> Readymades were a way to shake off the artwork's monetization, which was only just beginning. Only in the art world does the original work get sold then instantly acquire a kind of aura. But with my readymades a replica does the job just as well.[37]

With the readymade Duchamp wanted to "throw out the idea of the original" (and by the same token the idea of the copy), because "there is nothing unique [...], in fact, nearly all the readymades that exist today are not originals in any normal sense of the word." And yet even if there is nothing unique about them, even if they are not produced by the hands and virtuosity of the artist, it is no less imperative that they be signed, a fact which, as we shall see, threatens to sneak through the back door what had been thrown out the front.

The Readymade Is a Technique of the Mind

The readymade does not only, or not primarily, mark the passage from the prosaic world of the commodity into the enchanted world of art, or the porosity between art and non-

art. Nor does it represent a simple blending (or collision) of heterogeneous elements, as today's art critics usually maintain.

Duchamp's techniques constituted the procedures by which he was able to overthrow established values—including and especially aesthetic values—in order to achieve a "transvaluation of all values" (Nietzsche).

The readymade is neither an object nor an image: you have to "look while turning your head away." It isn't necessary to see, you need only know that an operation, a gesture, has been carried out. The readymade doesn't appeal to or flatter the eyes; instead it forces us to think, to think differently, by orienting the mind differently. From this perspective it is possible to define the readymade as a technique of the mind, a technique of both desubjectivation and new subjectivation.

The readymade is not produced, it is chosen. And the choice occurs not only by suspending the role of the artist and the product attributed to him, but also by neutralizing aesthetic taste. For taste is a habit acquired through repetition; good taste, no different from bad, represents pre-established ways of judging, feeling, and seeing, which are no more and no less than prejudices and clichés. In order to choose the readymade a certain "freedom of indifference" must be achieved, that is, the suspension of all social habits, norms, and significations.

> The interesting thing for me was to extract [the object] from its practical or utilitarian context and

> bring it into one that was completely empty, if you want, empty of everything, empty of everything to such an extent that I spoke of complete anesthesia.[38]

For new meaning to emerge, for something new to occur, this emptiness, which liberates possibility, must be traversed. It is at this empty point, at this nonsensical point, that we no longer see the same things, that we no longer hear the same things.

On the one hand, this choice depends on the artist's subjectivity, on the other, it completely neutralizes it. The artist does indeed make the aesthetic decision to limit himself to choosing an object rather than painting, rather than making something with his hands. But through his choice a space opens in which the "rationality" and conscious control of the subject and the mind governing what he does are interrupted. He lets himself go: lazy, he settles into an "empty" temporality, an "empty" duration, in which it is no longer the artist who chooses.

"How do you choose a readymade?" someone once asked Duchamp: "It chooses you, so to speak."

The readymade follows from a deliberate choice that opens a new dimension where there is no longer any choice but where something happens, something takes place. The readymade is a meeting, an encounter ("what matters is the date, in other words, the day and time"), the trace of an event.