H-France Review Vol. 25 (March 2025), No. 10

Thierry de Duve, *Duchamp's Telegram: From Beaux-Arts to Art-in-General*. London: Reaktion Books, 2023. 456 pp. 156 ill, 69 in colour. £30.00 (hb). ISBN 9781789146981.

Review by Raymond Spiteri, Victoria University of Wellington.

Marcel Duchamp is currently regarded as one of the most important artists of the twentieth century. His work, particularly the invention of the readymade, an everyday object nominated as a work of art, has served as an inescapable reference point for contemporary art practice since the 1960s, a decade when art moves away from modernism's emphasis on the specific mediums of painting and sculpture toward an expanded field where "anything whatsoever" can be art. It is this condition that Thierry de Duve seeks to understand in *Duchamp's Telegram*. However, rather than simply considering Duchamp as a transformative figure who exerts an oversized influence on contemporary art's break with modernism, de Duve seeks to nuance this account in two ways: first, in identifying contemporary art's rupture as one not with modernism but the nineteenth century Beaux-Arts system; and second, by casting Duchamp as the messenger of this transformation, dispatching a telegram in 1917 that would only be widely acknowledged in the 1960s. This subtle shift in perspective has profound implications on the status and role of modernism in the history of twentieth century art, which now appears as an effort to neutralize the "anything goes" effect of the Art-in-General system.[1]

De Duve has long been a leading figure in the field of Duchamp studies. His previous publications are obligatory reading, drawing out the philosophical dimension of Duchamp's example.[2] *Duchamp's Telegram* readily builds on this foundation, but places greater emphasis on historical detail to develop an elegant argument that draws on an expansive breadth of examples. The book's argument is presented as a series of layers--the metaphor of unpeeling an onion is used at one point--using a wealth of detail and numerous examples drawn from Édouard Manet to Marcel Broodthaer, Immanuel Kant to Clement Greenberg, while still maintaining an elegant and highly accessible text.

The key to the book's argument is in its subtitle, "From Beaux-Arts to Art-in-General," which refers to a hitherto overlooked "event of immense art-historical magnitude" (p. 13). This event is the passage of one art world to another. The first artworld is the French Beaux-Arts system of the nineteenth century, with the Académie, the École, and the Salon, all ultimately supported by the state. In this system the Salon jury played a pivotal role in deciding what was legitimate art that could be exhibited at the annual Salon, and what was refused this status, thereby falling into the indeterminate category of non-art. The second is what de Duve calls the Art-in-General system--

the art world that we now live in--where "anything whatsoever" can be art. Where the Beaux-Arts system asked the specific question "Is this painting or sculpture beautiful?" the Art-in-General system asked the generic question "Is this thing a work of art?" De Duve dates the origins of the Art-in-General system to the establishment of the Salon des Indepéndants in 1884, with its rejection of the authority of the Salon jury, exemplified by the motto *ni jury ni recompense* (no jury, no prizes). The open policy of the Salon des Indepéndants established the a priori principle that anyone could be an artist: all one had to do was join the Société des Artistes Indépendants, which would then entitle you to exhibit in its annual Salon. And if anyone could be an artist, then anything could be art.

If the founding of the Salon des Indepéndants in 1884 established the a priori condition for the Art-in-General system, its actual emergence would be delayed, only being fully acknowledged some eighty years later during the 1960s. Here de Duve casts Duchamp in the singular role of a messenger, dispatching a telegram in 1917 in the form of the readymade *Fountain* (a male urinal) submitted to the inaugural exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York. The significance of this telegram is that *Fountain* "is situated at the juncture of two art worlds, one in which a urinal *cannot* possibly be art and one in which *this* urinal *is* art" (p. 13), and thus exemplifies the rupture between the Beaux-Arts system and the Art-in-General system.

This sketch somewhat oversimplifies de Duve's account of the Duchamp's telegram. When the New York Society of Independent Artists was incorporated and organized its first exhibition in 1917, it modeled itself on the French Société des Artistes Indépendants, adopting the same "no juries, no prizes" motto of its French precedent. Upon paying dues of six dollars, members of the association were entitled to exhibit their artwork in the Society's inaugural exhibition. Using the pseudonym R. Mutt, Duchamp anonymously submitted a bathroom fitting under the title of *Fountain*. The rules of the association did not specifically exclude everyday objects (why should they?), so there was no pre-existing reason to refuse *Fountain*; however, given its unconventional (and potentially offensive) character, the hanging committee (which included Duchamp and the French artist Albert Gleizes) elected not to display *Fountain*. Duchamp, without revealing his complicity, defended R. Mutt's right to exhibit his artwork, and resigned from the committee in protest, since the artist had fulfilled the requirements to have his work exhibited.

Indeed, as de Duve notes, the immediate motivation behind *Fountain* may be found in an act of petty revenge against Gleizes. In 1912 Duchamp was associated with the Puteaux Cubism group around Gleizes and Jean Metzinger.[3] That year Gleizes and Metzinger had secured a room in the Salon des Indepéndants in which to display cubist works. Duchamp submitted *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, but since the picture suggested movement, it was incompatible with Gleizes and Metziger's understanding of cubism, and they pressured Duchamp to remove the picture from the exhibition. Although the painting would be a *succès du scandale* the following year in New York at the Armory Show, thus establishing Duchamp's avant-garde *bona fides* in New York, this act of censorship deeply affected Duchamp: in *Pictorial Nominalism* de Duve argued it was the catalyst for the invention of the readymade; in *Duchamp's Telegram*, it now acts as a spur to test the resolve of the Society of Independent Artists, its commitment to the "no juries, no prizes" principle.[4]

Although *Fountain* is now forever associated with Duchamp, he only acknowledged its authorship twenty years later with the release of his *Boîte-en-valise* (1936-41), a suitcase containing reproductions of sixty-nine of his artworks; prior to this date, his authorship of *Fountain* was a closely guarded secret.[5] Given that *Fountain* was not exhibited, this episode could have easily remained a minor footnote in art history, if it had not been first photographed by Alfred Stieglitz, and then reproduced in *The Blind Man*, a small magazine edited by Duchamp's friends Pierre Roché and Beatrice Wood, facing and unsigned editorial on the "The Richard Mutt Case."[6] The issue was published in May 1917, after the Society of Independent Artists exhibition had closed, and had little immediate effect. But, for de Duve, this double-page spread represents the telegram announcing the Art-in General system, dispatched in 1917 but whose reception is not acknowledged until the 1960s.

This argument is developed in the book's second section, "Don't Shoot the Messenger," which initially appeared as a series of articles in *Artforum* between October 2013 and April 2014. Beginning with the criticism that anything today can be art, exemplified by the French exclamation "*n'importe quoi!*", de Duve dispassionately notes "it is nowadays, in principle, *technically feasible*, *aesthetically permitted* and *institutionally legitimate* to make art from anything whatsoever" (p. 70). This is a central characteristic of the Art-in-General system, the condition was only widely acknowledged during the 1960s when Duchamp's telegram was finally received. This message was initially read in reverse (what de Duve calls the Duchamp syllogism): Duchamp's urinal is art; thus, anything can be art, and when anything can be art, anyone can be an artist (p. 92), giving rise to the utopian belief during the 1960s exemplified by Fluxus, Alan Kaprow, Joseph Beuys and others.[7]

The third section of the book is "Acknowledgement of Receipt," where de Duve discussed three artists who each acknowledge Duchamp's telegram: the French artist Bernard Vernet, the Israeli artist Nahum Tevet, and the American Donald Judd. While Judd is a canonical artist, Vernet and Tevet as less known internationally, and initially seem odd choices, but by the 1960s the transformation of the artworld had reached a critical mass where de Duve is spoilt for choice. Vernet's 1963 *Tas de charbon* (*Pile of Coal*) gains resonance due to the phrase "*Tas de charbon*" being used by art critics as putdown for the "anything goes" condition of contemporary art. De Duve traces the process whereby non-art becomes art, transforming an extra-artistic aesthetic experience of a pile of asphalt or coal into the artistic aesthetic experience of the artwork *Tas de charbon*, establishing the artistic genealogy--the network of relations and influences--that give meaning to this transformation.[8]

With Tevet de Duve asks how an artist working on a kibbutz in Israel, far from the center of the artworld, could develop a practice that acknowledges the receipt of Duchamp's telegram in a series of work on glass? The value of Tevet's work is that it does not overtly reference Duchamp, but initially responds to a series of local constraints: obligatory military service, the restrictions of kibbutz life, and the provincial art world of Israel. Despite these limitations, Tevet arrives at a practice that would not be out of place in New York, transforming an improvised method of exhibiting drawings sandwiched between sheets of glass into a sophisticated exploration of the very conditions of making art. Tevet's insight was not merely to acknowledge "anything whatsoever" could be art, but to recognize the way self-imposed constraints help to produce art.

With Judd de Duve is on more familiar territory, focusing on the status of the object in Judd's practice and in Michael Fried's art criticism, particularly his 1966 essay "Art and Objecthood."[9] Although neither Judd nor Fried held Duchamp in high esteem, they implicitly acknowledge the receipt of his message in their response to the "anything goes" condition of the post-Duchampian artworld. This response assumes antithetical form: for Judd it is the genre of specific objects that are neither paintings nor sculptures; for Fried--a fervent defender of modernism--it is to deny legitimacy to objects that are neither paintings nor sculptures, which, for him, fall into the indeterminate category of theater.

If Verney, Tevet, Judd and Fried all to some degree mistranslate Duchamp's telegram, the final section of the book is devoted to Marcel Broodthaer, who de Duve argues correctly acknowledges Duchamp's telegram. Where the conventional interpretation of the readymade resulted in some form of an institutional definition of art, so ultimately it falls to the museum to judge what is legitimate art (i.e., "museum-quality" art), Broodthaer's fictional *Musée d'art moderne, Département des aigles* performs a subtle yet profound critique of this power. Broodthaer, like Duchamp, recognized the museum as the ultimate repository of art, yet was critical of the tendency to cede the power to arbitrate "what is art?" to an institution. Broodthaer employs the readymade strategy to present various objects emblazoned with eagles as works of art in a fictional *Musée d'art moderne*, but by accompanying each work with plaques stating "Ceci n'est pas un objet d'art" he simultaneously admits and denies the art status of these objects. In contrast to the various institutional definitions of art derived from Duchamp's invention of the readymade, which ultimately cede authority to the museum, Broodthaer's "work contains, *in nuce*, … a sketch of the ethical principles according to which the authority of the existing museum should be negated and then critically reaffirmed" (p. 324).

In *Duchamp's Telegram* de Duve has written a convincing case for re-evaluating the way that Duchamp has been incorporated into the history of twentieth-century art, no longer as an influence on later artists but a messenger that the rules of the Beaux-Arts system no longer applied, and art could now be made from "anything whatsoever." This has the potential to be an important book, a subtle yet profound shift in perspective that reframes an all too familiar history of modernism, contributing to a significant reevaluation of the history of twentieth-century art. Although modernism is not discussed at length in the *Duchamp's Telegram*, it will be the focus of a forthcoming volume, *Manet's Testament*, which promises to be an essential read.

The principal limitation of the book--depending on your perspective--is that it exemplifies an approach to art history as a neatly defined discipline, an autonomous field where art furnishes the prism to interpret other art. By way of comparison, it is worth comparing de Duve's distinction between the Beaux-Arts system and the Art-in-General system to Jacques Rancière's distinction between the representational and the aesthetic regimes of art.[10] Both authors posit a fundamental rupture between two aesthetic regimes, but Rancière locates this rupture in the eighteenth century--in Friedrich von Schiller's fifteenth *Letter on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, or Johann Joachim Winkelmann's description of the *Belvedere Torso*, for instance. For Rancière what characterizes the aesthetic regime of art is not the autonomy of art, but the autonomy of aesthetic *experience*, an experience that potentially harbors an emancipatory moment of political dissensus. This moment is easily lost in *Duchamp's Telegram*, neutralized by the Kantian questions that animate de Duve's critical practice.

Nonetheless, De Duve has issued a methodological challenge to art history. In its choice of examples *Duchamp's Telegram* preserves the central position of Paris and New York in the global artworld. Indeed, Duchamp has long represented a link between the Old and New Worlds, Europe and America, thereby preserving the privilege of "the West" in a global art system barely troubled by the legacy of colonialism. Yet the model of a telegram could be recast to articulate different histories. What would happen if Maurice de Vlaminck's acquisition of an African Fang mask in 1906--the titular discovery of African art by the Parisian vanguard--was substituted for *Fountain*?[11] I don't think this would invalidate the central claims of *Duchamp's Telegram*, but it would call forth a different history, one more attuned to the global distribution of power.

NOTES

[1] *Duchamp's Telegram* is the first installment of *Modernism Revisited*. Its companion is a forthcoming volume, *Manet's Testament*.

[2] This philosophical dimension is evident in the call to use Duchamp to update Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790) in *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), and *Aesthetics at Large* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). Also see *Pictorialism Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, translated by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

[3] Gleizes and Metzinger would publish the doctrinaire *Du Cubisme* in 1913.

[4] Thierry de Duve, *Pictorialism Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, translated by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). One possible objection here is that Gleizes and Metzinger's rejection of *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* from the cubist room did not theoretically preclude Duchamp from exhibiting the picture elsewhere in the 1912 Salon des Indepéndants, but this would miss the point of this act of censorship, which was to reveal to Duchamp the underlying condition of the Art-in-General system.

[5] De Duve discusses the exhibition history of *Fountain* on pp. 95-102. The ambiguity around *Fountain*'s authorship has created a sideline re-attributing *Fountain* to Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, a position rebuked by recent research. See p. 400, fn. 9-10.

[6] The original version of Fountain would be lost. The extant versions of *Fountain* are later replicas. In 1964 Duchamp authorized the dealer and Duchamp scholar Arturo Schwarz to issue an edition of eight replicas of *Fountain*; two previous replicas had been sourced by Sidney Janis for an exhibition in 1953 and by Ulf Linde for a 1963 exhibition in Stockholm (95-96).

[7] In a 1964 performance Beuys wrote on a panel "The Silence of Marcel Duchamp Is Overrated," and later criticized Duchamp for failing to draw the correct conclusion from *Fountain* that "every human being is an artist" (Beuys cited by de Duve, p. 94).

[8] Although not acknowledged in the book, the appearance of *Tas de charbon* anticipates the process art that would emerge in the late 1960s, notably the work of Robert Morris and Robert Smithson.

[9] "Art and Objecthood" was initially published as part of a special issue of *Artforum* on American sculpture in June 1967.

[10] Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, edited and translated by Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010); *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, translated by Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013).

[11] On the Fang mask see Joshua I. Cohen, *The "Black Art" Renaissance: African Sculpture and Modernism across Continents* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020). For an interesting attempt to claim a parallel between the readymade and tribal art, see Thomas Folland, "Readymade Primitivism: Marcel Duchamp, Dada, and African Art," *Art History* 43, no. 4 (September 2020): 802-826.

Raymond Spiteri
Victoria University of Wellington
raymond.spiteri@vuw.ac.nz

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ISSN 1553-9172