

## Marcel Duchamp, Art and the Ethical Significance of a Renewed Relationship with the Object

In this paper I shall show that the artworks of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) harbour as yet unheeded ontological and ethical implications. I shall do this through an investigation of Duchamp's readymades and his writings on "indifference," as well as Duchamp's most complex work, *The Large Glass*. I shall show that Duchamp's works accomplish a recalibration of the work-spectator relationship through which modern art reclaims and proclaims the object's inherent rights to self-manifestation and self-affirmation. I conclude by showing that the challenge posed by Duchamp's art does not pertain to art alone, but calls for a genuine renewal of our ethical relationship with the other generally.

### The Production of Readymades

"The Ready-mades are anonymous objects that the artist's gratuitous gesture, the mere fact of choosing them, converts into works of art."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Octavio Paz, "The Castle of Purity," in Octavio Paz, Rachel Phillips and Donald Gardner, *Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare*, trans. Donald Gardner (New York: Seaver Books, 2011), 21.

Marcel Duchamp's theory of art seems, at face value, rather simple and bereft of the depth to which artists and art theorists, even contemporaneous with Duchamp himself, have accustomed us. He claims that everything is art if deemed and called so by an artist.<sup>2</sup> "Art," therefore, does not name a criterion of excellence; something does not have to reach a preset standard of quality to acquire the right to be called art. There is art, Duchamp seems to imply; it is a fact. Art, however, occurs in a creative act which is never fully determined by the artist alone, but involves the spectator's participation. In fact, Duchamp claims that,

all in all, 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. This becomes ever more obvious when posterity gives its final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists.<sup>3</sup> It is the spectator who, through a kind of "inner osmosis," deciphers and interprets the work's inner qualifications, relates them to the external world, and thus completes the creative cycle.<sup>4</sup>

The creative act intrinsically necessitates the work's encounter with a public and must, therefore, be exhibited. Duchamp argues also that the intention of the artist, although not exhaustive, is important. It has a pivotal role in the event of the creative act and he allocates a very precise place to it in the evaluation of good, bad or indifferent art.<sup>5</sup> He does so by introducing what he calls the "personal art coefficient"<sup>6</sup> which measures the artist's success, and lack of it, in imparting to the spectator his or her intention. For Duchamp, therefore, in the work-spectator encounter there is space for the artistic intention of the artist.

This is an extremely important point to bear in mind when evaluating the readymades artistically. There is valuable evidence for Duchamp's own relation to these everyday objects and to their "charm." As is well known, Duchamp describes the objects which become the readymades as primarily objects of aesthetic *indifference*;<sup>7</sup> objects, that is, that arouse in him no positive or negative

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<sup>2</sup> See Lucy R. Lippard, *Dadas on Art: Tzara, Arp, Duchamp and Others* (New York: Dover, 2007), 139. The circularity of the argument here is evident. Whether this circularity is vicious or not would have to be ascertained on another occasion. Here, these claims will be accepted at face value because it is not within the scope of this paper to offer an internal critique of Duchamp's writings.

<sup>3</sup> Marcel Duchamp, *The Creative Act* (Paris: L'Echoppe, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, expanded ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> Duchamp, *The Creative Act*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> I shall not be going into political interpretations of the meaning of "indifference" as one

aesthetic reaction. He calls this “a remarkable achievement.” This achievement is for Duchamp, in fact, their weird “attraction,” namely: their ability to put the spectator in a state of indifference. It seems to me therefore that with the readymades, Duchamp’s “artistic intention” is to let this indifference present itself to the spectator. The readymade artworks would not themselves be “indifferent works of art” - as opposed to good and bad works of art - but, rather, good works of art which as such present to the spectator the everyday object’s aesthetic indifference. The readymade artwork’s aesthetic indifference would not simply amount to the everyday object’s inability to arouse immediate negative or positive reactions in the person encountering it, but, at the same time, it would also include the spectator’s positive reluctance to judge (positively or negatively) and situate the readymade artwork’s aesthetic significance. Thus, in the case of the readymades, aesthetic *indifference* is necessarily the outcome of a complex artistic event involving the work, the spectator and the artist in a single creative act.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Duchamp’s readymades are artworks. Not only because we can now safely vouch for this since history and academia have equally accepted and lauded them as *good art* but also because by Duchamp’s own criteria, these objects become artworks simply in virtue of their being produced and exhibited by an artist. But, can one really say that the readymades were produced by Duchamp? Although most of these objects are usually crassly and commonly available for anyone to see and use, their exposition as *artworks*, thus their being *produced* and *put forth* as artworks, is the work of Duchamp. The powerful and insightful experience into the strange aesthetics of these vulgar objects urges Duchamp to turn towards them, as anonymous objects, artistically.<sup>9</sup> But, do such common objects of everyday life lose their paleness simply by being *produced*, which here means *put forward*, as works of art by the artist Duchamp?

Duchamp’s primary accomplishment is that of having translated his openness to the peculiar, mute aesthetic of common everyday objects into a potentially

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finds, for instance, in Moira Roth’s *The Aesthetic of Indifference*. Interesting and illuminating as Roth’s analyses are, I tend not to agree with the relation between the “political setting” she gives and the reaction to it of artists like Duchamp, Cage, Cunningham, etc. See Moira Roth, “The Aesthetic of Indifference,” in Moira Roth and Jonathan Katz, eds. *Difference/Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage*, (Singapore: GB Arts International, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Duchamp, *The Creative Act*.

<sup>9</sup> The reader is to note that this articulation of the readymades’ appearance as artworks revolves around Duchamp’s artistic world-view which, I believe, “accompanies the object... like a users’ manual.” See Alain Badiou, “Some Remarks Concerning Marcel Duchamp,” accessed January 24, 2013, [http://www.lacan.com/symptom9\\_articles/badiou29.html](http://www.lacan.com/symptom9_articles/badiou29.html) accessed 24/01/2013.

communicating phenomenon, namely works of art. Duchamp somehow saw that, only by making of these objects “works of art,” thus only by *producing them as artworks*, do they and their very muteness become conspicuous. Only at that stage could their everyday mute presence demand a creative work-spectator relationship for itself. Yet, why should one bother putting forward this everyday-muteness so as to show itself and to present itself to the public? Briefly, the reason is: to counter the readymade-culture. I believe that Duchamp’s readymade artworks offer a remedy to the culture of the readymades.

There exist today, possibly more than ever before, not only common, blunt, pale and anonymous everyday objects, but also readymade presuppositions, readymade “sais” and “not-sais,” dos and don’ts, readymade opinions and expectations and world views. These are usually indicative of the one same thing, namely, a blind participation in the widespread understanding of things.

This is true also, and indeed especially true, in the case of art. Viewers, artists, art critics, art historians and art theorists, often feel diversely obliged to abide by a habitual behaviour characteristic of the artworld.<sup>10</sup> This behaviour can result in two basic stances towards the readymade, but equally also towards any other artwork. The two stances appear to be opposites but, really, they speak the same language. On the one hand, the common and connoisseur exhibition-goer can dismiss the readymade as not worth the challenge, simply discrediting the work and judging it as non-art. According to this stance, art is way too lofty an activity and a discipline to bother with such petty proposals. On the other hand, the spectator can step into the “interested/interesting” mode whereby he ventures, more or less boldly, to understand and to *make* sense out of what he sees. My emphasis on “make” here is important because, in such cases, the spectator really believes that the sense, if any, of the artwork, depends on him; literally, he is to make something out of it. The art-connoisseur, more often than not, makes sure to publicly affirm that he finds such process of *making-sense* fascinating, stimulating, positive, interesting, fun and even healthy. He even makes sure to claim this publicly when, more often than not, with cool and nonchalance, he ultimately dismisses the whole enterprise as unimportant and even futile.

Hence, the two apparently opposite reactions to the artwork are rooted in the same basic dismissal of the work itself. Confronted by such strong dismissive reactions, the very radical, yet fragile and delicate aesthetic importance of the readymades, is squashed and annihilated.

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<sup>10</sup> I borrow this term from Arthur C. Danto. See, for instance, his “The Artworld,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no.19 (1964): 571-584.

Most commonly, however, the viewer stands somewhere in between these two extreme positions and, dismissing (actively or passively, consciously or not) the work itself as mere provocation of no intrinsic value, turns to the immediate context in which the object is exhibited - the museum, art history and theory textbooks or reviews, exhibition hall or prestigious curatorship - as indicative of its worth and justification. He thinks of the dialectical tension between a valueless object and an extremely valuable space or attention as a “valuable” artistic provocation. This position usually leads to the claim that, with the readymades, it has become clearly evident that what turns an object, even a common one, into a “work of art” is simply its acceptance by, and inclusion into, an acknowledged and authoritative artworld context.<sup>11</sup>

There is in fact truth in this last, median, position. Duchamp’s readymades do provoke; indeed I shall be describing them as essentially “a challenge.” Their provocation is, however, not so much directed towards a rethinking of the art-institution relationship but, rather, to our own ability to-be-spectators of a work of art - an exhibit in a museum, exhibition or any other artworld institution or context - in general.

Before progressing, let us recall three main criteria which, reading Duchamp, seem to be necessary for the very emergence of works of art. These include that:

- a. the artist human being decides for their production as artworks;
- b. the creative act includes the encounter between the work and the spectator;
- c. the artist’s intention is important and should secure some role in the work-spectator encounter.

This is, basically, the theoretical framework that enables the readymade objects to become good works of art. The result? Nothing. They remain mute. These objects still have no aesthetic quality. Why, one may rightly ask, should such things be put there, to stand stark naked at the centre of attention? What is expected of the spectator in front of these objects’ abject nakedness?<sup>12</sup>

These questions and comments are not accidental and person-specific; they are not even outdated. They encapsulate, I believe, the most general and popular reactions that people still have when faced with any of the readymades. One

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<sup>11</sup> Exponents of versions of the conventional or institutional theory of art famously include Arthur C. Danto and George Dickie. See, for instance, Arthur C. Danto, “The Transfiguration of the Commonplace,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33, no.2 (1974): 139-148, and George Dickie “What is Art? An Institutional Analysis,” in *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1974).

<sup>12</sup> “The word ‘naked’ is found everywhere [in Duchamp’s works],” Badiou, “Some Remarks Concerning Marcel Duchamp.”

needs just observe people surrounding the *Fountain* even today whenever and wherever it is exhibited to agree to this.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the main issue seems to be this: how can a spectator be-there, be a spectator of a readymade artwork, without succumbing to that strange embarrassment which emerges immediately and which urges him to hide or to look away? How to refrain from hurriedly making out of the stark nudity of a common object something other than what it is, either a “nothing” or “something else,” perhaps “more profound”? How to refrain from, driven maybe by the most positive intentions, *dignifying* the object in a direction which plainly takes one’s attention away from it? How to be-there as spectator without succumbing to readymade *dicta*, platitudes on its *interesting* claims on art? Or, how not to succumb to claiming to have (finally!) realized that even the dull, commonly known façade of an everyday object does indeed hide shades of aesthetic beauty which, themselves as well - why not? - should be appreciated?

Because, and this is the basic conviction of this paper written by one, common spectator of the works of Duchamp, the very essence of Duchamp’s readymades challenges and urges the spectator to sustain and endure, rather than escape or suffocate, such an experience of the object. Endurance is key to an original openness towards the object. I believe that, consistent with Duchamp’s writings on these works, one must say that the readymades invite the spectator into an artistic event whose ideal, yet natural, offspring would be the experience of the radical aesthetic indifference of the object exhibited. Endured, such indifference would usher in and welcome the manifestation of the object in its crass and banal factuality. The obscene artistic manifestation of the aesthetic indifference of an object of everyday consumption acts as prelude to the possibility of reckoning anew with the thing or the object itself.<sup>14</sup> Duchamp’s readymade artwork invites the everyday object to manifest *wholly* and *only* itself and, in accordance with the creative act dynamic principle it, in turn, invites us - the spectators - to see it for what it is.

As soon as in the creative act the aesthetic indifference of the object *produced* by the artist is not endured and *corroborated* by the spectator’s judgemental indifference, the spectator turns violent. Faced with such an obscene challenge, the spectator either flees when faced with the object or challenges it to destruction.

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<sup>13</sup> To get a feel for what I mean here, the reader is invited to look for a short film directed by Mike Figgis for Tate Modern “3 Minute Wonder: Marcel Duchamp ‘Fountain,’” YouTube video, posted by Tate, March 4, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIApXD-TdDs>.

<sup>14</sup> Although this sounds Kantian, a Kantian interpretation of the readymades or of the object generally is not what is being pursued here. The extent, if at all, to which my claims can be considered Kantian in nature cannot be assessed here.

Indeed, as a natural reaction, the spectator often opts for a synthesis of these two reactions and, by *interpreting* the artwork in a habitual way that explains its very presence and existence away, annihilates its strange and unbearable uncanniness. “I [Duchamp] was aware at that time that for the spectator even more than for the artist, art is a habit-forming drug and I wanted to protect my ‘ready-mades’ against such contamination.”<sup>15</sup>

My claim is, therefore, that the widespread habit of immediately engaging in the activity of *interpreting* every object we come across, risks inducing us to lose sight of the fact that the originality of the readymades as an event in the history of western art is, primarily, *to urge the spectator to refrain from either plainly dismissing or over-interpreting the artwork* or indeed, I claim, *any object*. The readymades seem to demand that, standing in front of them, the spectator lets a kind of equilibrium take place which, rather than filling – further endowing him with ideas on art and with interesting, theoretical and aesthetic connections – is emptying. Duchamp’s readymades urge an artistic catharsis which, I believe, is the prelude for a renewed artistic expression and aesthetic experience of the artwork and, more generally, a prelude for a renewed, mindful relationship with the object. Because, in the readymade-culture, we do need to be made to see the urgency for a renewed awareness of the object itself: “It is, evidently, impossible to just look.”<sup>16</sup> “[Dada] was a way to get out of a state of mind - to avoid being influenced by one’s immediate environment, or by the past: to get away from clichés - to get free. The “blank” force of Dada was very salutary.”<sup>17</sup>

### ***The Large Glass: A Complex Invitation to Attend to Simplicity***

The readymades shock the sensitive spectator by challenging him to attend to a vulgar object. Art urges the spectator to refrain from dismissing the object and, equally, from turning it into something else perhaps by make it “interesting.” I call this the “indifference-challenge.” In the following, I shall show that it ushers in the possibility of our abiding by what I call the “*a-interesting* attitude.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Marcel Duchamp, “Apropos of ‘Readymades,’” in *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Da Capo, 1973), 142.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur C. Danto, “Just Looking,” in *The Nation* April 7, 2008, 41-44.

<sup>17</sup> Marcel Duchamp in “Interview with Marcel Duchamp,” by James Johnson Sweeney, in Lippard, *Dadas on Art*, 141.

<sup>18</sup> It is probably good to clarify that, notwithstanding similarities in my use of terms such as “a-interesting” with those found in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, I shall be making no reference to Kant in this article. Kant’s use of the term “disinterest” is essentially bound to matters of taste and beauty whereas here I shall be using similar terms in relation to occasions characterised by the radical absence of beauty and ugliness. Thus again, an evaluation of the

The term “a-interesting” as used here is not synonymous with “indifference.” Indifference, as I see it, makes room for the emergence of the “a-interesting attitude” which, in the successful creative act, lets the object present itself. Thus, the “a-interesting” falls nowhere in the spectrum delimited by the “interesting” and the “not-interesting.” The “a-interesting attitude” is a formal space of *content-ability*; it does not urge a contentless, dull and vacuous passivity on the part of the spectator but, rather, the very opposite. It challenges the spectator’s attentive sensibility to notice the emergence of a very particular content, namely, the self-affirmation and self-acclamation of the object. The “a-interesting attitude” unfolds precisely at that juncture when the spectator is (made) conscious of his activity and responsibility as a spectator. “A-interesting” names the outcome of a successful realization of a very particular work-spectator relationship through which the readymade object is set-free to *positively produce* and present itself as the *everyday* object which it is.

The readymades, therefore, enact a recalibration of artistic experience and evaluation. As an event in the history of western art, the readymades mark an absolute-zero point where proper appreciation of an object touches upon, but differs completely from, “interpretation” of the object. Because, without an active process of interpretation on the part of the spectator, the common object of everyday life does not implode into nothingness; it does not dissolve into an unidentified thing. Without such interpretation, the object still is something; and, without interpretation at all, *something is what it presents itself as*.

At this stage, it is important that my claims are not misinterpreted. I should note - especially because of the similarities in words and formulations - that I am adamantly unwilling to support the thesis put forward by Susan Sontag in an important essay entitled *Against Interpretation*.<sup>19</sup> There she says:

In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable.<sup>20</sup> ... Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.<sup>21</sup> ... The best criticism,

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extent to which my claims are congruent with or complementary to Kant’s aesthetic theories will have to be postponed to another context.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



and it is uncommon, is of this sort that dissolves considerations of content into those of form.<sup>22</sup>

On the face of it, my thoughts seem rather congruent with those of Sontag. However, this is not the case. I believe that Sontag moves too easily, too quickly from dismissing the prevalent and dominant role of artworld interpretation in contemporary art-appreciation to the positing of, and arguing for, a *sensuous* characterization of the proper relation between work and spectator: “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”<sup>23</sup>

This is a dangerous and illegitimate shortcut which, because I chose to tackle the art-problem from and through Duchamp, I have avoided making myself. Duchamp’s work is surely not sensuous - “olfactory” or “etinal” - and it does not urge a sensuous response from the spectator. In the readymades, the object is introduced - indeed *produced* - bringing-with(-it) simply what it is, and the spectator is urged to see, understand and take note of this. As a spectator, I believe that the challenge posed by Duchamp’s art is, therefore, to let the exhibit be what it is without dismissing it or interpreting it further, thus *refraining from playing the game of the “interesting prejudice” whereby the object is interpreted and transformed into something else in accordance with the immediate interest/s of the spectator*. Hence, I claim, the need to dwell with the object in the “a-interesting conviction and attitude,” aware that “interesting” is not a proper response on our part to the manifest banality of the object produced.

Against Sontag, therefore, it is to be noted that what the object is, is not necessarily determined sensuously.<sup>24</sup> Rather, Duchamp’s readymades expose the ontological fact that an object is determined primarily by its being the very object which it is, for instance, in its everyday contribution to our lives. Throughout its life, the object *instantiates, acquires or adopts* a positive ontological identity. Intellectually boring (or indifferent) as it may indeed be, this is *what* the readymade artwork reverts to, produces forth and demands that the spectator’s full and open attention attends to.

Therefore, the leap is not simply from “traditional-interpretations” to “sensuous captivation” as Sontag seems to urge but, rather, from “interpretation” to “simple and common awareness” of the object. Such awareness does not need to be intellectually-vacuous or to be simply sensuous; on the contrary, the readymades have the potential to show that, bereft of any traditional (artworld)

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>24</sup> This is, arguably, itself a very *interesting* (over- or under-) *interpretation* of the object-hood of the object.

interpretation, *the object does not dissolve into a sensuous itch* but rather retains a definite and complex ontological identity of its own.

The fact that a readymade object is the thing which it is, namely the common thing which everyone immediately “knows *as*” this or that thing, is not the result of an active interpretative work of some spectator but, rather, the simple acknowledgement of the object’s self-affirmation of its identity in a context of community. We would not be kind towards such an object if, to refrain from “objectifying” it, as it were, we simply refuse to call it by its name. This would simply amount to a refusal to acknowledge the object as such. Rather, to make sure that, even in the spirit of so-called post-modernism, we do not overstep ourselves in this regard - namely, overestimating and overpowering our faculty of interpretation - we should embark on a new examination of the limits and the limitations of our powers of interpretation. To question, that is, how much *what* something is, is conditioned by our understanding relationship with it. In this regard, I believe that Duchamp’s readymades are a powerful post-modern attempt to regain a relationship with the object which is driven by and rooted in the everyday object’s naively candid yet authentic self-manifestation and self-affirmation. The conviction of the importance of abiding by the “a-interesting attitude” on the part of the spectator and its enactment, enable the everyday object to manifest itself, corroborating to us that it also - happily, so to speak - sees itself as the object which we see it as.

This reading of the role of the readymades already indicates their importance and that of the “a-interesting attitude” for a renewed (aesthetic) awareness of the object as implied by the art of Duchamp. Yet, the importance of the readymades and the “a-interesting attitude” has to be further emphasized as I believe that to dwell in the “a-interesting attitude” is not a demand of just a select few of the works by Duchamp but is, rather, characteristic of the very essence of Duchamp’s contribution to western art and is, therefore, present in all his works. Not having the space to attempt a readying of each and every work of Duchamp, I choose to analyse, as a case in point of a work evidently different from the readymades, *The Large Glass*.

*The Large Glass* is a complex and huge undertaking. Indeed, “complex” is arguably the most pertinent and adequate description of this work. The time-contours of its creation are open-ended; it took years for Duchamp to complete it and he failed, making it an unfinished classic.<sup>25</sup> Its complexity was fatefully further enhanced when cracks resulting from mishandling were approved by

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<sup>25</sup> See Marcel Duchamp, “Regions which are not Ruled by Time and Space,” in *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 127.

Duchamp as constitutive of its integral unity - he called them, in fact, “a ready-made intention”<sup>26</sup> - and thus to augment and complete, rather than diminish or ruin, its essence as a work. All this indicates that even physically, sheer open-ended-complexity is the basic characteristic of this work. Also, *The Large Glass* gives the immediate impression of being the result of a very well thought out intellectual endeavour; of a laborious undertaking heavily endowed with reflections, philosophical and artistic considerations.

Indeed, I must note, it tends *too* easily to shift the attention of the spectator away from itself towards the complex thoughts and artistic processes allegedly leading to it. This is also very much attuned to Duchamp’s own views on art. He had declared that art should move away from being purely “retinal” - and “olfactory,” mainly making direct reference to sensory and sensuous appeals - towards being more directed to, and intended for, the mind; to be more intellectual. I believe that no other work of his embodies this synthetic statement on his art better and more fully than *The Large Glass* and precisely here starts my conviction that the reading of the readymades that I presented above applies to this work in an even more powerful manner.

Evidently, however, this work outrightly rejects at least one fundamental characteristic of the readymades, namely “simplicity.” The readymades are - evidently more or less - *simple everyday* objects whilst *The Large Glass* is a laborious work, surely not a found object. Indeed, even its official title - *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* - is complex. The other, common, one “The Large Glass” seems to be more of a useful short cut making reference simply to the work’s physical constitution. In fact, these two titles should be heeded together as indicative of the aesthetic-dynamics of this work; their relation unfolds the relationship between “complexity” and “simplicity” and their role in the work-spectator creative act.

On the one hand, there is a simple title that describes the work simply as what it factually is, namely a large glass or amalgam of two large glass planes with other materials in the middle; on the other hand, the complex - “artistic” - title which describes the work in such a way so as to initiate (*interested* and *interesting*) interpretative stories surrounding the factuality of the work, stories, as it were, with a life of their own. The complex title is not directly corroborated by the work. Necessarily, therefore, abiding by the title as descriptive or at least somehow indicative of the real subject-matter of the work - which its, albeit syncopated, narrative form itself teases the spectator to expect and to demand - anyone trying to make sense out of it in this way is immediately invited to start floating freely

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.; see also Paz, “The Castle of Purity,” 28.

and roaming into artistic, philosophical and traditional speculations on art. The spectator is immediately teased and invited to simply forget the work, the object itself.

But, how does *The Large Glass* present the same challenge set by the readymades? *The Large Glass* is simply a far more difficult challenge to the spectator's ability to endure and inhabit the work-spectator relationship honestly and truthfully; a challenge, that is, to let the work be precisely what it is: in this case, a very confused set and agglomerate of things – basically, distractions. Altogether a different scenario from that of the readymades, here we are not confronted by a vulgar and found-everyday object that demands attention and whose very everyday simplicity acts as the prime distraction for the spectator to lose and forget the object but, rather, “complexity” is the prime distraction, used as both bait to deceive and occasion to redeem. *The Large Glass* stands on the other, far, side of the challenge-spectrum *opened up by the readymades*; it brings the challenge to the spectator to abide in the “a-interesting attitude” to new heights. The evident and, at the same time vacuous and unclear “complexity” of *The Large Glass* - especially if read through Duchamp's own writings in *The Green Box*<sup>27</sup> - threatens to push even the most sensitive and honest spectator back into common-trodden clichés on art through which the work is rendered interesting, even revolutionary. In these ways, the work is always eased back into the traditional artworld scenario. According to my reading, therefore, *The Large Glass* is an amplified challenge to the spectator posed by the readymades. *The Large Glass* is, ultimately, of the same species as the readymades. However, not only is its physical complexity more prone to numb the spectator's sensibility and lead to indulgence in art speculations - as is also favoured by the complexity of the artistic title *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* - but, also, as an utterly uncommon object with no place in a community of familiarity, it comes without the ability to help the sensitive spectator seeing it for what it is. *The Large Glass*, in this sense, *is nothing at all*. In *The Large Glass*, therefore, it is the “a-interesting attitude” itself that stands stark naked and, as soon as it manages to manifest itself, this object *should* disappear or rather dissolve into the nothingness which it is.

The embarrassment can be less powerful and less conflicting for the spectator in this extreme case than when confronted by the readymades because in this special case the spectator can, to all appearances, easily and safely reassure

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<sup>27</sup> Which Duchamp himself seems to encourage one to do. See his interview for the BBC's *The Late Show: Late Night Line-Up*, June 15, 1968: “Marcel Duchamp, 1968 BBC Interview,” YouTube video, posted by Dennis Liu, April 1, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bwk7wFdc76Y>.

himself of the adequacy of the attempt to “interpret” such an evidently complex and “interesting” work. *The Large Glass*’s vacuous complexity challenges the traditional work-spectator relationship simply by forcing a very complex, unknown and alien object, to present itself for what it is: *nothing*; surely nothing *interesting*.

In *The Large Glass* therefore, the a-interesting attitude’s importance as *the* challenge for a renewed artistic expression and aesthetic understanding generally is completely distilled. I believe this work to be the ultimate indication that Duchamp’s work urges a recalibration of the work-spectator relationship through which Art properly claims itself *anew* as the space for the emergence of the object itself. Through Duchamp, Art fights the prejudice that *the interesting* is the proper object of artistic expression, aesthetic understanding and appreciation and, also, of human attention generally.

### Against the Interesting Prejudice

Prejudice is natural, not only in the artworld. In every context and every circumstance we tend to view whatever we encounter as confirming our notions of ourselves, of our environment, our opinions, our culture and our values. To be sure, life would be rather difficult if we were to discard all that constitutes our basic notions of ourselves and of our surroundings and, as it were, continuously start anew. Difficult and, to a large extent, logically impossible. Yet, it is possibly when prejudice starts replacing thinking altogether and, consequently, when it starts to corrode our ability to be open and understanding towards what we encounter, that this word starts to corroborate the negative resonance with which it is now most commonly associated. According to the reading offered above, what art has been asking of us at least since Duchamp’s readymades is the bracketing of this negative prejudice. First and foremost, however, it has been urging us to remember and recollect our most basic healthy prejudices and to differentiate these from those other prejudices which are exposed when we utter, or act according to, the most common and widespread *said*s and *not said*s, and *dos* and *don’t*s, participating in the widespread “bullshit,” to say it with Frankfurt.<sup>28</sup>

Basically, art is challenging us as to our capacity to be genuine spectators and listeners. As I have said above, “a-interesting” is not a value-judgement; the “a-interesting” does describe an object of no real intrinsic interest but the exact opposite: it challenges the spectator’s attentive sensibility to notice the

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<sup>28</sup> Harry Frankfurt defined the term “bullshit” precisely in terms of the common and the widespread. See his essay *On Bullshit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

self-affirmation and self-acclamation of the object itself, thus to refrain from relating to whatever we encounter in terms of its “interest for us.” To dismiss and to quickly step into the making-interesting attitude are exactly the reactions to be avoided because they are essentially equally violent towards the object. And, if your reaction to, or your thoughts on, what is being said here is of the sort: “well, yes... *whatever*,” you are evidently still not touched by the ethical significance of the readymades’ challenge to you. The indifferent object cannot shout at the spectator, but it urges us all as spectators to be first and foremost equally silent and *to start listening*. Only by listening can we become open to what challenges us responsibly into an alien encounter with a common object or phenomenon.

It is true that to listen is far from understanding. Yet, listening is an essential prerequisite to understanding. We can say that listening helps us to see what challenges us all the time and deserves a genuinely respectful response. To listen and to see require that we slow down; it takes time and - which is the same for most of us today - it costs money. Money, in itself always an extrinsic and parasitic mode of evaluation, takes one’s look away from every object towards itself as *the* criterion of what is and what is not possible, doable, desirable, likeable, loveable, justifiable and permissible. Often, in the everyday context it is very hard to even note challenging moments of this sort. Often, too easily and hastily, too comfortably, we do not see a person, but an employee; not a man, but an amputee; not a woman, but a refugee. We see facets of faces, dismembered images, indeed *snapshots*. Snapshots and, more generally, the snapshot mentality - fostered also by the easily accessible, fast and concise<sup>29</sup> interactive news through the social and other media - helps us to quickly make up our minds and decide as to the “relationship” that we are to have with “the challenge,” *whatever* it may be.

Confronted by a refugee, say, one can easily produce readymade saids and not-saids, both pro- and con- the presence of such people in our midst; both sides (pro- and con-) can indeed feel that they may be more or less original and bold in their beliefs and in their speaking and acting them out. Often, for both pro- and con-, such immediate and generally loud manifestations serve as occasions to look interesting, interested and opinionated; an occasion to somehow look the part. At one and the same time, these are all occasions to *not* look “the refugee” in the face; easy way out manoeuvres to escape even the possibility of being engaged spectators and listeners of a real challenge. A real challenge is always *complex*, thus understanding it involves a laborious involvement. The shocking and almost unbearable demands that I believe

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<sup>29</sup> Using the term in the manner of Noam Chomsky in “Concision in US Media.”

Duchamp's readymades and, even more strongly, *The Large Glass* make on the spectator, in the form of questions would look like these: Do you (still?) have the properly human strength to be a meaningful spectator and to listen? Can you manage to not foster whatever faces you with readymade images of your own spiritual and intellectual ego-centrality? Can you see beyond the bounds of your intelligence, of your culture, of your opinion and knowledge, of your own limited situatedness? Can you really *see* anything but yourself? Can you spare a blank moment, surrendering the ammunition of bullshit which, normally, enables your busy trafficking with and consumption of things and people, and look at me? Look at me!

I am afraid that the Duchamp-challenge - to heed the "indifference challenge" so as to access the "a-interesting attitude" - has been seldom appropriated in art and, consequently, it has as yet always been far from infiltrating and influencing wider common everyday life situations. For instance, in the contemporary Euro-African-Mediterranean region especially since the increase of the number of irregular migrants crossing the seas towards Europe and, specifically in Malta, where on the negative side extremist attitudes are flourishing all around us *vis-à-vis* all those whose very presence threatens to slow down the pace of the comfortable busyness of our preciously noisy sheltered lives, on the positive side one would expect significant public occasions where the other (the migrant or the refugee, that is) is evidently respected for being *another* - with his or her very own history, customs, opinions, religion, language, expectations and delusions - and not merely empathized with as one of a bunch ("migrants") of unaccomplished (potentially) *us*.

Thus, the "a-interesting attitude" is, yes a phenomenon of aesthetic importance but, immediately and maybe more importantly, it is also a phenomenon of great ontological and ethical significance. It urges us to clear ourselves of our own interests and to be honestly captivated by the object itself; to be captivated not merely by what, in the object, is obviously advantageous to and interesting for *us* but, rather, to stop, reckon with and listen to "the challenge," the object itself. Only then may we start a new relationship with the object which, in turn, would probably enable us to start getting glimpses of genuinely *new* interests and genuinely *new* engagements of ours. Only in this way could we start reassuring ourselves that if and when something or someone waves at us from afar, calling at us and attempting to attract our attention, we can candidly and genuinely wave back to indicate that, at least, we see and truly acknowledge *their* presence. Genuine recognition and acknowledgment are the basis for an ethical relationship with the other.