

The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade: An Essay on Use-Value and Art-Related Practice

"The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade: An Essay on Use-Value and Art-Related Practice" by Stephen Wright [via 16 beaver group]

In a late text, Marcel Duchamp set out to distinguish several different types of readymades. Of particular interest here is the genre which he punningly described as "reciprocal readymades." Anxious, he claimed, "to emphasize the fundamental antinomy between art and the readymade," Duchamp defined this radically new, yet subsequently neglected genre through an example: "Use a Rembrandt as an ironing-board."⁽¹⁾ More than a mere quip to be taken at face value, or a facetious mockery of use-value, Duchamp's example points to the symbolic potential of recycling art – and more broadly, artistic tools and competence – into the general symbolic economy of everyday life. For in that respect, the reciprocal readymade is the obverse of the standard readymade, which recycles the real – in the form of manufactured objects – into the symbolic economy of art.

Historically speaking, the readymade is inseparably bound up with objecthood: it refers to a readymade, manufactured object. Yet, it would be reductive to confine the readymade to its objective dimension alone, if only because it provides such a strong general image of the reciprocal logic between art and the real.

In the same way that framing an object in an art context neutralizes it as an object (distinguishing it, as it were, from the mere real thing), can the de-framing of an artwork neutralize it, in reciprocal fashion, as art? This is an important question, and one to which Duchamp was expressly alluding, because it would enable art to produce a use-value. Since Immanuel Kant's influential championing of "purposeless purpose" and "disinterested satisfaction" as defining features of our engagement with art, it has been broadly held that art cannot produce use-values. Kant argued in effect that art, unlike design, could not be evaluated and appreciated on the basis of its objective purpose – be it external, regarding the utility of the object, or internal, regarding the perfection of the object. In so doing, Kant sought to preserve art from the realm of the "merely useful"; and in the contemporary

world where utilitarian rationality and the sort of cost-benefit analysis to which it leads reign supreme, where art is regularly co-opted by such profit-driven, subjectivity-production industries as advertising, to even mention use-value tends to smack of the philistine. Of course one might say that in such a context there is something circular about defending art on the basis of its uselessness alone (or even its “radical uselessness,” as Adorno put it), for it would seem to suggest there is something worthwhile and thus useful about something ostensibly lacking use-value...

In any event, I have found that many contemporary artistic practices in the public sphere cannot be adequately understood unless their primary ambition to produce a use-value is taken into account. In trying to grasp what is at stake and at play in many of the art-informed practices which are, today, self-consciously concerned with generating use-value by injecting artistic skills into the real, it is useful to anchor their approach in art-historical terms; I want to argue that one way of understanding these works is as attempts to reactivate the unacknowledged genre of artistic activity conceived by Duchamp. For though he never got beyond the speculative phase – never actually putting his thoughts on the reciprocal readymade into practice – Duchamp clearly saw it as a way of “de-signing” art, of removing the signature by using an artwork to produce a use-value. For it is quite difficult to imagine how an artist-signed artwork (a “Rembrandt”), put to use as an ironing board, could then be re-signed as an “artistic” ironing board. Indeed, Duchamp’s point was that it would revert to non-art status – the price to be paid for acquiring use-value, though it would assuredly be a most uncommon ironing board.

That’s just art!

By that reckoning then, Kant was quite right: use-value and art, at least as it is now conventionally understood, are mutually exclusive terms. But is it perhaps possible to envisage dealing with use-value in substantively different terms? In terms literally reversing the dominant mode of twentieth-century artistic production? By thinking of art in terms of its specific means (its tools) rather than its specific ends (artworks)? In contexts often far removed from art-specific spaces and time, the past few years have witnessed the emergence of a broad range of such practices, which, in spite of certain affinities and indeed, in some cases, of undeniable family

ties, can only be described as art-related rather than art-specific activities – often laying no particular claim to art status. The particular form of these activities suggests that they may be motivated by the desire to escape what is surely one of the most enfeebling accusations with which art is often, implicitly or explicitly, targeted: that it's not for real; or to put it bluntly, that it's just art. For much of modernity, this could be dismissed as quite an unfair charge, and in any case situating art tautologically as what it is would not have been seen as disqualifying its role or impact in the public sphere. Much twentieth-century aesthetic philosophy was devoted to placing art in invisible parentheses, in an effort to separate art objects from the “mere real things,” as analytical aesthetics cleverly puts it. Comparing a readymade to the “mere real thing” is certainly an elegant way of underscoring art's ontological privileges; but there is something insolent and obviously fraudulent about describing non-art as “merely” real, particularly as art has often shown itself all too ready to fall back on its status as the “mere” partner of the real. Invariably, when some artwork or other is threatened with censorship, the artworld's reaction is to assert the work's art status, upholding the privileged status it enjoys in the symbolic order. Ironically however, in so doing, it is implicitly acknowledged that it is merely art, not the dangerous, and thus potentially censorship-deserving, real thing. In other words, cordoning art off from the real has, in many cases, afforded art a place in the public eye, but it has done so at the considerable cost of stripping art of its capacity to find a way to have any real use-value and undermining its claim to do much damage to the dominant order of signs.

Art without artists, without artworks, and without an artworld

What happens when art crops up in the everyday, not to aestheticize it, but to inform it? When art appears not in terms of its specific ends (artwork) but in terms of its specific means (competence)? Well, for one thing, it has an exceedingly low coefficient of artistic visibility: something is seen, but not as art – for without the validating framework of the artworld, art cannot be recognized as such, which is one reason why it is from time to time useful to reterritorialize it in an art-specific space through documentation. The four collectives whose work I shall consider in a moment – The Yes Men, bureau d'études, AAA Corp, and the Grupo de Arte Callejero – all confront a common operative paradox:

though informed by art-related skills, their work suffers from – or, one could say, enjoys – impaired visibility as art. Yet this impaired visibility may well be inversely proportional to the work’s political efficiency: since it is not partitioned off as “art” – that is, as “just art” – it remains free to deploy all its symbolic force in lending enhanced visibility and legibility to social processes of all kinds. It is a form of stealth art, infiltrating spheres of world-making beyond the scope of work operating unambiguously under the banner of art. The art-related practitioners I mention here, and many others like them, have all sought to circumvent the reputation-based economy of the artworld, founded on individual names, and have chosen to engage in collaborative action; they use their skills to generate perception and produce reality-estranging configurations outside the artworld. As the wide range of tools developed by these collectives show, this has nothing to do with shunning or banning image production; art has no reason to renounce representation, a tool it has done much to forge and to hone over its long history. The question is the use to which such tools are put, in what context, and by whom: tools whose use-value is revealed as they are taken up and put to work. Specifically, then, how can art-related skills and perceptions be channelled in such a way that they empower rather than impress people? In other words, what do reciprocal-readymade practices, which see art as a latent activity rather than as an object or a process, physically look like?

The Yes Men: donning the fictional garb

The device which The Yes Men have most effectively gleaned from the toolbox of art history is verisimilitude, which they deploy in a framework of what might be described as deferred-disclosure tactics. The group is perhaps best known for designing fake-functional websites that parody, imperceptibly and incisively, those of socially pernicious political and business organizations, including the G.W. Bush campaigns in 2000 and 2004, and perhaps most notoriously, the World Trade Organization (WTO). So un-artlike – that is, so unidentifiable as art – was The Yes Men’s parallel WTO website design that it actually led to the group being invited, on several occasions, to represent the WTO at prestigious gatherings of various sectors of the business community, invitations which The Yes Men were only too pleased to accept. Asked to represent the WTO at a textile-manufacturers congress in Finland, one of The Yes Men took the podium and proceeded to deliver a keynote address

on the virtues of free-trade and the evils of protectionism, which appeared to most audience members so WTO-like that they barely cringed when the speaker went on to argue that the abolition of slavery was an unreasonable interference in a market-driven economy. This impeccably designed performance was only revealed for what it was – a radical and thought-provoking spoof on the absurdity of laissez-faire discourse – when the impostor stripped off his three-piece, pin-striped suit and, clad only in a skin-tight bodysuit, proceeded to deploy a four-foot long phallus-like object attached to his midriff. Deadpan as ever, he described this Priapic excrescence – to the dismay of the security guards and the guffaws of the audience suddenly shaken from its ideological torpor – as a managerial tool for keeping close tabs on labour activity on the factory floors of the world. Such antics are made possible only by the deployment of art-related, fiction-design skills to infiltrate spheres well outside the world of art.

Perhaps a still more caustic fiction-based instance of “subversion of corporate subversion,” as The Yes Men put it, was the genuinely fake press release they designed and sent out by email to thousands of people, ostensibly from Dow Chemical Corporation, on the eighteenth anniversary of the accident in Bhopal, India, which begins as follows:

December 3, 2002

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: <mailto:press@dow-chemical.com>

DOW ADDRESSES BHOPAL OUTRAGE, EXPLAINS POSITION

Company responds to activist concerns with concrete action points

In response to growing public outrage over its handling of the Bhopal disaster's legacy, Dow Chemical (<http://www.dow-chemical.com>) has issued a statement explaining why it is unable to more actively address the problem.

"We are being portrayed as a heartless giant which doesn't care about the 20,000 lives lost due to Bhopal over the years," said Dow President and CEO Michael D. Parker. "But this just isn't true. Many individuals within Dow feel tremendous sorrow about the Bhopal disaster, and many individuals within Dow would like the corporation to admit its responsibility, so that the public can then

decide on the best course of action, as is appropriate in any democracy.

"Unfortunately, we have responsibilities to our shareholders and our industry colleagues that make action on Bhopal impossible. And being clear about this has been a very big step."

In many cases unaware that what they were reading was art, public reaction was one of outrage. Dow's reaction was to use its corporate influence to immediately shut down the ThingNet – the New York-based Internet provider The Yes Men had been using (along with tens of thousands of other subscribers) – which offers stinging testimony as to how the corporation assessed the action's veritable use-value, and gives some insight into the limits of corporate respect for the Internet as a public domain. In light of this action (further information on which can be found at www.theyesmen.org/dow/), I emailed The Yes Men the following question:

If threatened legally for having defamed, slandered or libellously depicted the WTO, the GATT, the Republican presidential candidate, DOW Chemical or whomever, would you argue that, ontologically speaking, your work is in the realm of fiction, rather than in the realm of the real, and therefore no more subject to prosecution than a character in a novel can be judged in a court outside of that novel's fictional framework? In other words, do you consider yourselves to be intervening in the real or in fictional representation?

To which I received the following, unambiguous reply:

In the real. Using fiction very truthfully, is how we see it. Providing transparency through truth masquerading as fiction. Actually not even masquerading, for that implies dressing-up, and there's no dressing-up – it's by donning the fictional garb that the nakedness is achieved. (2)

All too often, art's engagement with the real is construed in terms exemplified by the fruitless efforts of Don Quixote to set the world aright: the cockeyed knight's self-detrimental though sublime misapprehension of reality has led many to the melancholic conclusion that art is well advised to remain in its own sphere,

rather than combating an order of reality entirely foreign to it. The Yes Men, however, seem to take fiction by the horns, reversing the logic of Quixotic antics, thereby suggesting that today the conventional relationship between fiction and reality has itself been reversed. Rather than fighting a reality anachronistically misconstrued in terms of fiction, The Yes Men “don the fictional garb” to smuggle a public reality check right to the foreground of the stage-managed theatrics devised to conceal big business interests, exposing the naked truth beneath the mantle of legitimacy which media consultants – the real fictioneers of today – spend their days carefully spinning.

bureau d'études: autonomizing cartography

The truth-value of fiction, particularly when wielded with humour, can be powerful indeed. But in the end, the point is to incite people to look at the real – and to do something about it. Mapping information, power and influence networks, producing flowcharts that link the often invisible, overlapping interests of technological, bureaucratic and economic power – in short, the component parts of biocracy in the era of the post-national state – has been the project of the art collective, bureau d'études over the past eight or so years. The Paris-based group has produced a dozen or so cognitive maps in an attempt to foster autonomous knowledge – autonomous, that is, from the monopoly held by the information-production regime of contemporary capitalist society. While many of the maps are denunciatory, revealing the collusion between pharmaceutical, biotech, telecommunications, media and resource-extraction interests, others contribute to solidarity by drawing attention to networks of alternative knowledge and power (social centres, alternative media coops, squats, etc.). Typically, the group produces hand-out maps (60 x 84 cm), which are distributed in contexts where such autonomizing cartographic information may be empowering – in demonstrations or social forums, for instance. What is significant is that nothing whatsoever indicates that the maps have anything to do with art: of course, if one thinks about the extraordinary intricacy – and no less remarkable legibility – of the maps' design, one might well conclude that they are informed by art-related, graphic-design skills. Yet, situated outside the legitimating frame of the artworld, from which they have freed themselves financially and ideologically, they lay no claim to artistic status, and as such are diametrically opposed to Kant's

“purposeless purpose” of aesthetic delectation: their objective purpose is clearly the production of autonomous knowledge. For it would be a mistake to reduce bureau d'études' work to graphic design alone: the maps are not an end in themselves, but an art-informed contribution to a far broader resistance to the transnational production line. Unfolding the map, one is confronted with an almost dizzying accumulation of information; bewilderment however quickly yields to fascination and – thanks to the index of proper names on the back of the map – to the desire to investigate these unnoticed ties of power more carefully. The maps designed by bureau d'études have often been compared to the wonderfully detailed maps, hand-drawn by the late New York-based artist Mark Lombardi. The information presented is indeed comparable – but after all, the information is all publicly available and verifiable, and appears seditious only because the links are seldom explicitly drawn. The difference lies in the very different artistic status of the two projects, and the entirely different gaze to which that status leads: whereas Lombardi produced unique artworks whose coefficient of artistic visibility was consequently maximal, bureau d'études batch-print and distribute their maps by the thousands, inviting an entirely different perception.

AAA Corp: the use-value of the artworld

What bureau d'études does in figurative terms – pulling apart the intricate semiotic machinery of post-Fordist capitalism and reassembling it in unconventional ways – the group AAA Corp, also based in France, does in entirely literal, hands-on fashion. With technical means and an esprit de bricolage comparable to what one might find in an automotive repair shop in the outskirts of Africa, the group's members recuperated the carcass of a Mercedes 508 diesel truck, which they entirely redesigned and re-outfitted into a mobile and (more or less) roadworthy silkscreen studio, which they drive from event to event, making the silkscreen equipment available to those who wish to use it to print stickers, etc. Behind this low-tech, autonomous media truck, known as AAA Corp Serigraphik (2001), they tow a mobile pirate FM radio station (AAA Corp Transmission, 1999), comprised of a sound and broadcasting studio which is also open to all those desirous to disseminate alternative information. A second trailer has been revamped as a fully functional refinery for extracting oil from such oleaginous plants as rape seed. The oil produced serves a double purpose: as

an edible oil for salad dressing and French fries, and as a fuel oil used for running the group's expanding fleet of vehicles. In this instance, AAA Corp's slightly blurred, yet nonetheless undeniable, visibility on the radar screens of the artworld is a crucial tactical component in the group's work: just as the legitimacy of using a pirate radio broadcasting unit is dependent on the group's quasi-art status ("It's just art!"), so too their provocative use of self-pressed (and thus of course road tax-free) fuel oil to run their trucks escapes prosecution because of the exceptional status of art-related activities as opposed to their merely real counterparts. In this respect, AAA Corp is playing a double game; however, the contradiction is a productive one, for it enables them to engage in a reciprocal questioning both of the use-value of art and of the artworld (which in this light appears to be founded less upon a commitment to freedom than on the extension of privilege). The group's point is not to suggest that the world should abandon fossil fuels, nor even to merely condemn the wars waged to ensure their extraction, in favour of rape seed fuels - which would necessitate growing vast tracts of pesticide-concentrated monoculture. The point is to offer a tangible and infectious example of do-it-yourself autonomy.

Grupo de Arte Callejero: Making absence felt

Its name notwithstanding, the Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC, "Street Art Group") is, of the four groups mentioned, undoubtedly the one with the lowest coefficient of artistic visibility, though its contribution to enhancing the visibility of popular movements in Argentina has been highly significant. Founded in 1997 in Buenos Aires, it is currently made up of eight members, some of whom have formal artistic training, while others are bio-chemists or graphic designers. The group works in situations of public participation, rather than art-referenced contexts, using its graphic-design and art-related competencies to challenge the public consumption and foster the public production of signs. Over the past few years, the GAC has worked with the steering committee of the H.I.J.O.S. movement ("Hijos" is the Spanish word for sons and daughters, and was founded by the children of some of the 30,000 people those who were "disappeared" by the military dictatorship), in organizing public actions with the objective of drawing attention to the ongoing presence in Buenos Aires' residential neighbourhoods of those who, in one capacity or

another, took part in the criminal activities of the military government. These actions, highly specific to the Argentine context, and developed by H.I.J.O.S. in 1995, are known as *escraches*. An *escrache* is a sort of collective performance, where the production of memory and knowledge is inseparable from the production of form. The point is not so much to demand that the perpetrators of the genocide and political repression – which were of course not carried out by a handful of officers and their henchmen but required an extensive network of profiteers from all walks of life – be brought to trial, nor certainly to lynch them in a further miscarriage of justice, but to shed light on the role they played and their ongoing impunity, in order to constitute a sort of social memory and a popular understanding at the neighbourhood level of how the dictatorship actually functioned, so as to prevent its re-emergence. To this end, the GAC has developed a full array of tools – street signs indicating the location of clandestine detention centres, city maps showing the addresses of the perpetrators of repression – that the group deploys itself and makes available to others.

To a greater extent than the other examples I have mentioned, the GAC has chosen to inject art-specific competence into social processes as a tangible form of energy, while at the same time maintaining art as such in a state of objective absence. What they do is not art, yet without art it would not be possible to do it. This paradox underscores an ethical imperative: how could art adequately reconcile form and content to represent the absence of the 30,000 people assassinated by Argentina's military regime some two decades ago, for it is not their presence which is absent, but their absence which is so devastatingly present. In such circumstances, and others too, art must have the grace to respect that absence with its own.

Notes

An earlier version of the above text was first published in the leaflet accompanying the exhibition "The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade," shown at Apexart, New York, March 17 – April 17, 2004.

1. Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of 'Readymades'", was initially given as a lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 19,

1961; first published in *Art and Artists*, 1, 4 (July 1966), it is included in Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (eds.), *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Da Capo, 1989), p. 32. The text is easily accessible online, at <http://iaaa.nl/cursusAA&AI/duchamp.html>. In a spirited television interview with Guy Viau on Radio Canada, first aired on July 17, 1960, Duchamp gave an even more explicit description of his notion of reciprocal readymades. A transcription of this little known conversation is now available in French on the website of the online journal *Tout-fait* (vol. 2, issue 4, January 2002): www.toutfait.com/issues/volume2/issue_4/interviews/md_guy/md_guy_f.html.

2. *The Yes Men*, email correspondence with the author, April 27, 2003.