

Thierry de Duve on the Avant Garde and the Invention of Art
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Why Was Modernism Born in France?

THIERRY DE DUVE ON THE COLLAPSE OF THE BEAUX-ARTS SYSTEM

IN THE THIRD in a series of new essays on the avant-garde for *Artforum*, historian and philosopher [Thierry de Duve](#)'s exploration of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* leads us to an unexpected place: the nineteenth-century French Salon. The reception of Duchamp's scandalous readymade—despite its initial rejection in 1917—ultimately led to the watershed pronouncement that “anything can be art.” But de Duve argues that the work's rippling effect travels in all directions, and here he looks back to the surprising source of *Fountain*'s true message—that “anyone can be an artist.” The source, he proposes, was a group of upstarts who, in 1880s Paris, claimed independence within that most established of European cultural institutions, the Beaux-Arts academy.



Engraving of the Pavillon de la Ville de Paris, site of the Salon d'Hiver de la Société des Artistes Indépendants, December 1884–January 1885, avenue des Champs-Élysées, Paris.

*Every year the jury of the Louvre provokes numerous complaints. . . . Eminent artists who do not share the convictions of the jury have been excluded from the galleries. There is a simple way to silence those complaints: to admit all the submitted works indiscriminately.*¹
—Gustave Planche, 1840

*Everyone is an artist; all are trying to make money with their work.*²
—Alexandre de Cailleux, 1840

IN THE VEGETABLE GARDEN OF MEANINGS, some are carrot-like, others onion-like. The carrots shoot straight, dig deep, have an iron core and a purposive shape; the onions are all involute surface, skin upon skin upon

skin round a vanishing center. The message Marcel Duchamp put in the mail in 1917 with *Fountain* is an onion; its reception history is the history of its peeling. The first layer was not peeled off until the 1960s, when an ever-larger public was informed that a simple (some would say vulgar) ready-made urinal was a work of art worthy of the museum. With that, the news was officially released that anything could be art, and, whether in scorn or mirth, immediately decoded as follows: Once anything can be art, anyone can be an artist. I call this the Duchamp syllogism. In this manner a second layer of meaning was uncovered. But on the whole, the reception of Duchamp's message in the '60s was not true to the facts: It inferred the content of the second layer from the first, whereas it should have done the reverse. The factual truth is that once anyone and everyone can be an artist, it logically follows that anything and everything can be art.

There are at least three ways in which to understand that anyone can be an artist. For clarity's sake, let me cast aside the first two. When literary critic Marjorie Perloff, in conversation with poet Charles Bernstein, says, "To be an architect, you do have to learn very specific things. And a composer obviously has to know something about music. But anyone, it seems, can be a poet," she derides both the delusion of self-proclaimed poets and the contempt some people have for true poets whose skill they simply don't perceive.³ Pertinent as Perloff's remark is, my concern is not with this first (mis)understanding. Nor is it with the "Anyone can be an artist" utopia typical of the moment when Duchamp's telegram was received. Joseph Beuys is exemplary in this regard. He was convinced that every human being is endowed with creativity—an inborn, universally distributed, and thus egalitarian faculty of bringing forth new things, forms, or events—which, however, lies fallow in most people. The social task of professional artists, Beuys thought, is to liberate this repressed creative potential until all human labor deserves to be called artistic. Essential to his (and others') belief in creativity is that it is future-oriented: It has the performative structure of a promise.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the cynical way in which to understand that anyone can be an artist, and this is the way that concerns me here: It underpins the moment when Duchamp sent his message; it is constative and past-oriented; it takes stock of a given, of a situation that already exists.⁴ And given it was, in 1917, that in the specific context of the New York Society of Independent Artists, where *Fountain* appeared and instantly disappeared, anyone who could afford to part with six dollars could gain the status of professional artist. There is nothing utopian in this, unless you want to call utopian the desire for democracy and the revolt against the National Academy of Design that instigated the birth of the Society. While Duchamp definitely endorsed the revolt, he looked ironically at utopia. Ever the true dandy, he knew that art and democracy didn't mingle well, and that to be avant-garde meant in fact to retrieve aristocratic values from the gutter so as to escape absorption into the middle class by all means. He saw the democratic dream of the Society's founders as sketching the background against which the uniqueness—in Max Stirner's sense—of the artist and his art would shine. And although Duchamp did not uphold a systematically catastrophic view of history—say, Walter Benjamin's heap of debris at the feet of Angelus Novus; he was too much on the victors' side for that—he looked at the newborn Independents in terms of the institution whose demise had made the Independents possible. Beneath "Anyone can be an artist" there is, I want to argue, a third layer to the onion: "The Beaux-Arts system has collapsed."



Pietro Antonio Martini's etching of the 1787 Salon, Musée du Louvre,

Paris.

WHETHER DUCHAMP, ALBERT GLEIZES, or someone else convinced the founders of the American Society of Independent Artists to model their bylaws after those of the French Société des Artistes Indépendants, Duchamp knew the Frenchmen among the founders were offering their American colleagues a model both obsolete and vitiated by the betrayal of its principles. He had experienced that betrayal firsthand when the French Indépendants censored his *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)* at their 1912 Salon. The Cubists were then the latest avant-garde, and their dogmatism flew in Duchamp's face; I have no doubt he took the lesson. The extent to which he knew the Indépendants' history and prehistory is more difficult to gauge—he was not even born when the Société was founded—but the matter may be irrelevant: The messenger is not the author of the message he is carrying; why should he be fully cognizant of its content?

Let us go back, then, to the first Salon des Artistes Indépendants, held from May 15 to July 1, 1884. The motivation behind it was no doubt exasperation with the severity of the jury of that year's official Salon; the bulk of the Indépendants were *refusés* (the term for artists whose work did not gain admittance into the Salon). The fact that Georges Seurat was present at their first Salon and showed *Bathers at Asnières*, 1884, accounts for the event having been recorded as if it were a manifesto for Neo-Impressionism. In reality this is what the second Salon des Indépendants, held in 1886, would become—when Seurat showed the far more ambitious *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte—1884*, 1884–86. In 1884, the Indépendants were mostly a group of disgruntled, ostracized artists, most of them mediocre. They resented being designated as *refusés* and insisted that several medaled—and thus *hors concours* (jury-exempted)—artists had joined their ranks. Even before their Salon ended, its organizing committee was accused of embezzlement by some participants, who summoned a general assembly on June 4 and, a week later, registered a new competing Société with Maître Coursault, a notary public in Montmorency. The initial group soon lost the battle to the newly founded Société, which is still active today.⁵

The first Salon des Indépendants drew mixed reviews from the press; the majority of the critics were convinced that the official Salon's jury would be vindicated and the righteousness of its verdicts exposed for all to see—a conviction echoing the critical response the famous 1863 Salon des Refusés elicited at the time. Several critics questioned the name the Indépendants had given themselves. In *L'Illustration*, a critic writing under the pseudonym of Perdican wrote, "I shall reproach these *Indépendants* for baptizing themselves *Indépendants*."⁶ To which Paul de Katow added in *Gil Blas* the same day:

*It is not difficult to find one's way through this heap of paintings and sculptures that calls itself—I don't know why—the Salon des Indépendants. Independent of whom, of what? Is it independent of the Salon jury, which would have refused to admit two or three hundred ridiculous or hideous canvases or sculptures?*⁷

The same formula—"Independent of whom, of what?"—reappeared in *L'Intransigeant*, dated May 24, under the pen of Edmond Jacques, who answered his rhetorical question by declaring his surprise at having seen no *independence* at all at the Indépendants—no significant difference from the official Salon.⁸ But when the formula appeared again in Gustave Geffroy's comment on the Société's winter exhibition held six months later, it referred to another sort of freedom:

*And first of all, Independent of what? Was it worth taking up for a banner the name brandished by Degas, Miss Cassatt, Raffaëlli, Pissarro, and their friends? Was it worth breaking with the artists who accept a venue from the state only in order to exhibit the banal paintings on display these days in the pavilion lent—for lack of state support—by the city of Paris?*⁹

Geffroy pinpoints where the shoe pinches when he asks whether exchanging dependence on the state for dependence on the city of Paris really makes a difference. Indeed, the Indépendants' slavish allegiance to the city seems to compensate for their bold declaration of autonomy from the state. They went so far as to adopt the city's colors for their catalogue covers and the menu of their annual banquets in exchange for the venue on the Champs-Élysées, where all but two of their Salons were held in the first decade of the Société's existence. Wittingly or not, Geffroy is

echoing an anarchist's alleged protest at the April 16, 1884, meeting of the then still inchoate Indépendants: "You call yourselves Indépendants, and your first act of independence is to ask something from the state!"¹⁰



Georges Seurat, *Paysage, l'île de la Grande Jatte* (Landscape, Island of La Grande Jatte), 1884, oil on canvas, 25 3/4 x 32". From the Salon d'Hiver de la Société des Artistes Indépendants, December 1884–January 1885.

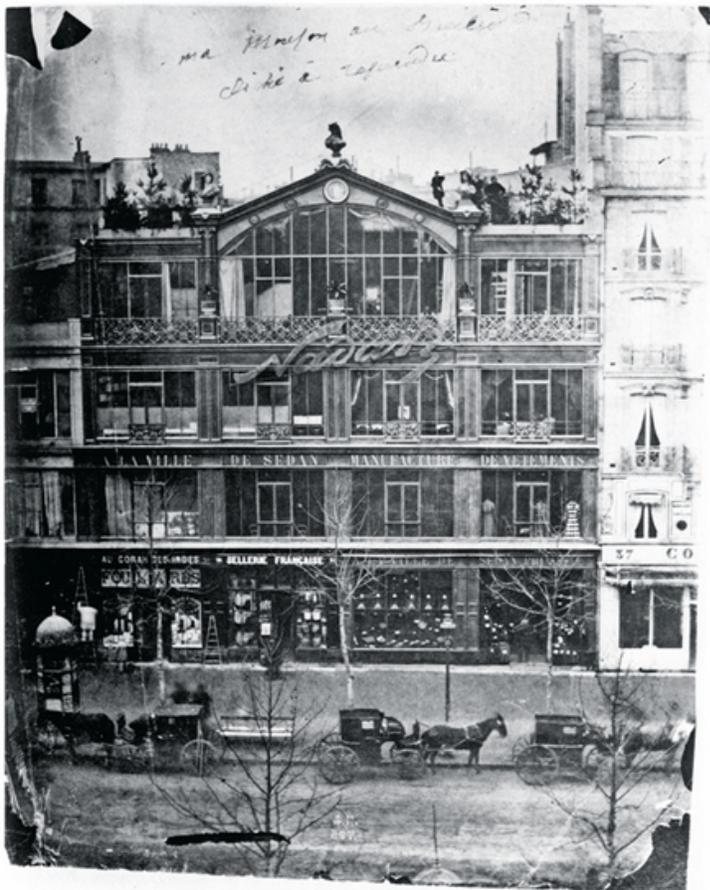
INDEPENDENCE OF STYLE was not at all the young Indépendants' first claim. Independence from the Salon jury was what mattered to the artists, individually and collectively. The motto "*Ni jury ni récompense*" (No jury, no prizes) was a rallying cry for a very large group of artists, only a handful of whom we remember today: Among the 402 artists who participated in that first 1884 Salon, only Charles Angrand, Henri-Edmond Cross, Albert Dubois-Pillet, Odilon Redon, Émile Schuffenecker, Seurat, and Paul Signac left a significant trace in art-history books, all except Redon as Neo-Impressionists. The 395 remaining artists were also present at the official Salon, could have been there, or were understandably rejected by it. The struggle for liberation from the jury was anything but congruent with the progress of modernism; to perpetuate that often-made conflation would be a huge mistake. It would also distract us from further peeling the onion of Duchamp's message. Here, in my view, is the question we should ask next: Why is it that peeling off the layer stating "Anyone can be an artist" strips bare the layer stating "The Beaux-Arts system has collapsed"?

One lazy modern habit is to assume that the natural condition of visual artists is that of freewheeling individuals, with or without academic training, who are asked by art dealers to show their portfolios but not their diplomas. We take it for granted that the practice of the visual arts, architecture being the notorious exception, is not protected in the same way as the practices of law or medicine. So what, we might think, if in 1917 any New Yorker with six dollars to spend could buy his or her membership card in the Society of Independent Artists? And so what if in 1884 any Parisian with ten francs could participate in the first Salon des Indépendants?¹¹ Well, those apparently identical situations are in fact very different from one another, and the transatlantic divide is crucial. The 1916 incorporation of the Society of Independent Artists in New York did not even make a dent in the American art world, whose evolution owed more to the ambition of a few audacious art collectors than to the collective action of artists. Only in France did the legitimacy suddenly acquired by a bunch of self-proclaimed artists signal huge and dramatic changes—changes that led to the collapse of the whole art institution.

When pressed to explain those changes, art historians often stress the Impressionists' boycott of the Salon in the decade before the birth of the Indépendants rather than that birth itself, and rightly so: The creation of the Société was more symbolic than instrumental. The advent of what Harrison and Cynthia White dubbed the "dealer-critic system"¹² was crucial: Without the support of their dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel, it is doubtful that the Impressionists could have afforded to boycott the Salon. Now, let's avoid the simplistic view that the Salon withered *because* the

most advanced artists of the time had ceased to endorse it. The truth is, modernist painting was born from *within* Salon painting much more than against or from outside it, as Édouard Manet’s career demonstrates. I think it highly significant that while the Impressionists boycotted the Salon, Manet declined to participate in the Impressionists’ exhibitions, even though the press repeatedly complimented him for (or accused him of) being the leader of the movement. And I think it equally significant that the Impressionists hesitated greatly as to the name they would give themselves before settling for “Indépendants.” For it is the Impressionists who first claimed that appellation. The group, whose composition varied a lot over the years, was incorporated in 1873 as a société anonyme coopérative. It adopted the title “Des Impressionnistes” for its third exhibition, in 1877, for which Gustave Caillebotte had unsuccessfully proposed “Les Intransigeants.”¹³ Unhappy with both titles, Edgar Degas imposed the name Indépendants for the group’s fourth exhibition, in 1879, much to the dismay of Auguste Renoir, who called this name *imbécile*. It was nonetheless retained for the fifth edition, in 1880; abandoned for the sixth, in 1881; resurrected by Durand-Ruel for the seventh, in 1882; and abandoned again, replaced by the neutral “Exposition de peintures,” for the eighth and last, in 1886.¹⁴

Is it by chance that the name Indépendants emerged in 1879 a few months after the Left forced Marshal Mac-Mahon to resign as president of the French Republic? Or, more than the change of regime per se, was the triggering factor not the conflict that ensued within the Beaux-Arts administration? Just before being ousted, Mac-Mahon had announced a two-tier Salon system, the project of which would still haunt the Ministry of Public Instruction and Beaux-Arts of his successor, Jules Grévy. There was to be a relatively liberal annual “exposition of artists” with an elected jury, and a tightly state-controlled triennial “exposition of art” that was supposed to show only the *crème de la crème*.¹⁵ The latter would certainly exclude the Impressionists, the former probably not. Boycotting the Salon was thus no longer an issue for them, whereas loudly proclaiming their independence from the state was an increasingly pressing one. For the Impressionists as well as for the Indépendants of 1884, the true novelty—whose radicality the artists only half-realized even though, as we shall now see, they had acquired it three years earlier—was *independence from the state*. The progress of the dealer-critic system made that independence materially possible. It also accelerated the demise of the Salon system.



**Studio of Félix Nadar, site of the 1874
Première Exposition de la Société
Anonyme Coopérative des Artistes (The**

First Impressionist Exhibition), 35, boulevard des Capucines, ca. 1861, Paris.

THE YEAR 1880 saw the last state-sponsored Salon, and it was a disaster. A conflict developed between Edmond Turquet, undersecretary of state for the Beaux-Arts and director of the Salon, and the painting jury—first over Turquet’s 1879 decision to install electric light in the Salon’s premises, then over his reform of the jury’s election, and finally over his system of classification. William Bouguereau and Paul Baudry successively resigned from their positions as presidents of the painting jury and, as a result, 7,289 works were accepted—the largest number ever—among them 3,957 paintings by 2,775 painters.¹⁶ Turquet retaliated by hanging the worst works in the best places in order to humiliate the jury. All the artists were furious, the press had a field day, the public snubbed the Salon, and the Beaux-Arts Ministry had to absorb a deficit of 46,559 francs (over \$150,000 today).¹⁷ Joris-Karl Huysmans commented:

*The 1880 Salon is a bedlam, a muddle, a hodgepodge made worse by the incomparable blunders of the new classification. On the pretext of democracy, one has stunned the poor and the unknown. Such is the novelty M. Turquet agreed to. But let that be; the painters don’t deserve our support. They constantly beg for the help and the control of the state whereas they should send it packing, refuse these childish rewards and medals, and try to walk on their own legs at last.*¹⁸

It was as if the minister of public instruction and Beaux-Arts, Jules Ferry, had heard Huysmans: Playing Pontius Pilate, he left it to Turquet to announce the withdrawal of the state’s support for the Salon. On January 17, 1881, addressing the artists, Turquet said:

*You must now entirely take charge of the free, material, and artistic management of the annual exhibitions, in replacement of the administration. The state will no longer intervene in your business. . . . Experience has sufficiently demonstrated that there is no possible compromise between complete management by the state and free management by the artists.*¹⁹

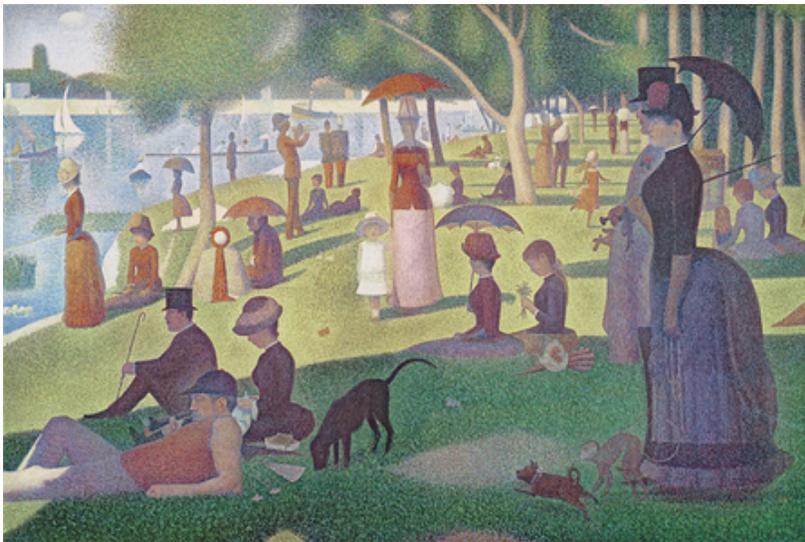
Turquet’s speech was reproduced in the catalogue of the next Salon, now fully separate from the state and held in May 1881. The same catalogue contains the statutes of a newly incorporated private society, dubbed Société des Artistes Français, drafted on January 28 and approved by Ferry on February 5. From that date on, and despite the state’s pathetic efforts to recuperate its lost power,²⁰ the artists were on their own: They were at last officially *independent*. In light of this, the creation of the Société des Artistes Indépendants three years later loses a bit of its heroism and revolutionary aura, and the constative and past-oriented sense of Duchamp’s telegram becomes clearer.

I think we should not make too much of the independence the French artists of the 1880s claimed. While the Impressionists proudly called themselves Indépendants, they were dependent on Durand-Ruel for their bread and butter. Independence for its own artistic sake, i.e., in the name of sincerity and originality, had already been a claim of the Romantics; it was a staple of art teaching since the 1863 reform of the École des Beaux-Arts. It may be another red herring, a sober, less flamboyant variant of the “All is art” and the “Everyone is an artist” utopias. What I think deserves attention is the uniqueness of the late-nineteenth-century French artists’ independence as independence *from the state*. The binary choice between state and artist management in Turquet’s announcement is striking. In his “Salon of 1876,” Émile Zola had anticipated precisely this binarism:

*My humble opinion is this: In matters of government, there are only two possible ways: the most absolute despotism or the most complete liberty. What I mean by the most absolute despotism is the autocratic reign of the Académie des Beaux-Arts. It was a mistake to take power out of its hands in order to entrust it to an elected jury whose judgments inevitably vary from year to year. . . . So, if it wants to escape its present embarrassment, the Beaux-Arts administration, in my opinion, has the following choice: either revert to the academic jury system, or institute free exhibitions.*²¹

We know the result of this either/or: Free exhibitions were eventually instituted, and modernism won the battle against academicism. That story has been told often enough, and I will not repeat it here. Nor am I offering an explanation, new or old, of why modernism triumphed; no explanation is needed other than its aesthetic superiority. I merely seek to understand why modernism was born in France; and I pursue this because following the trail of

Duchamp's message has led me to pursue it. I think part of the answer lies in this incredibly clear-cut either/or arrived at under very different circumstances by both a progressive critic (Zola) and a conservative administrator of the Beaux-Arts system (Turquet). I can't think of any European country besides France where the fate of the visual arts—whether in the 1880s or at any time since the creation of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in 1648—hinged on such a peculiarly stark absence of any room for compromise. Certainly the British Royal Academy was able to negotiate with its artists, granting them their freedom by keeping itself at arm's length from state control. Germany was still involved in court art after Bismarck. Italy before Garibaldi and Cavour had no inkling of what a centralized state might be. Even earlier in France, say, during the July Monarchy, *juste milieu* painters could thrive on the illusion that state monopoly and bourgeois individualism had found an aesthetic *modus vivendi*. By 1880, this was no longer the case. The French nineteenth-century Beaux-Arts system had either to die or be restored in the glory of its “absolute despotism,” as Zola wrote. If only symbolically, the advent of the French Indépendants tolled the death knell of a very powerful and unique art institution in which, at any stage of their career, artists needed to receive the state's stamp of approval. It was anything but anodyne for that institution to let the profession of painter or sculptor be opened to the *hoi polloi*, as happened in 1884 with the Indépendants. Duchamp's telegram now reads as nothing less than this French system's obituary.



Georges Seurat, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*—1884, 1884–86, oil on canvas, 6' 9 3/4" x 10' 1 1/4". From the Salon de la Société des Artistes Indépendants, August–September 1886.

WHY WAS MODERNISM BORN IN FRANCE? Here is a working hypothesis. When we speak of the Salon system, we use a metonym for a mighty ideological state apparatus—to use Louis Althusser's phrase—whose concentration of power had no equivalent outside France. Just one example: The man behind Mac-Mahon's two-tiered Salon system was Eugène Guillaume, a powerful civil servant in the Ministry of Public Instruction and Beaux-Arts who served both before and after Mac-Mahon's resignation. His full title was directeur général des Beaux-Arts, président du Conseil des Beaux-Arts, and directeur de l'École des Beaux-Arts. Of course, he was also a member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts. At that historical moment, such concentration of power around the Beaux-Arts banner may have betrayed the anxiety of the fine-arts administration clinging to the deck of a sinking ship. But throughout the century that banner had been proudly flown on a tightly knit network of institutions with a strong pyramidal structure, tremendous prestige in the worlds of art and politics, and a high level of inbreeding. In the words of art historian Paul Smith:

*The École was governed by the Académie des Beaux-Arts, itself governed by the Institut de France. The professors at the École were chosen from among the members of the Académie, and the same body also dominated the jury which awarded prizes at the annual Salon, or state-sponsored exhibition, where an artist could hope to gain critical recognition or official patronage.*²²

The Salon jury was the dead bolt of the whole system. It was by way of the jury that, throughout the nineteenth century, the state exerted its monopoly over artists' access to their profession and controlled their careers until late in life. As usual, what mattered to the state apparatus was the perpetuation of its own power—"Men are replaced, but

the bureaucracy remains,” the critic Albert Wolff wrote in 1885²³—even though it systematically gave the pretext of quality control on the artists’ output in order to justify itself. Thanks to the jury, the system could afford much more aesthetic flexibility—verging on opportunism if not sometimes on incoherence—than is generally assumed. It was never a monolithic institution; *academic* and *official* were rarely simply synonymous. The state’s cultural policy varied with every change of regime and even with the personality of the monarch or the president.²⁴ Nor did the system go uncontested: Not one Salon went by without prompting protests from the artists and proposals to reform the jury rules from one or another faction of the administration.

But what I think matters more than anything else is that the state exerted its monopoly over the art world exclusively through the Salon jury and, conversely, that the Salon jury was the exclusive instrument of the state’s control for control’s sake. It is too often believed that orienting the artists’ apprenticeship in the desired direction or imposing an official style were the goals of the state apparatus.²⁵ Attempts at imposing an official style were never very successful. Direction of the artists’ schooling was more efficient, but then mainly because it created networks and allowed nepotism to thrive.²⁶ The system was such that, whatever the style in vogue, the state and only the state was empowered to decide who was and who was not legitimately an artist, and this decision was made via the Salon jury. Acceptance into or rejection from the Salon was the relevant lock that opened or closed all other opportunities: procured the artist national, municipal, ecclesiastical, and private commissions; earned him critical attention in the press; ensured the sheer visibility of his work with the public; attracted dealers and collectors; and allowed him unjuried entry into the next Salon if medaled. Such an aggregation of arbitrary decisional power in a single cogwheel of the Beaux-Arts machinery, and over such a length of time (the first jury was instituted in 1748), has had no match anywhere in Europe or elsewhere.

But striking as this unique feature of the French Beaux-Arts system is, it might not have exerted pressure toward the birth of modernism as forcibly as it did had it not entered into violent tension with another unique feature of this system: the free-for-all access of the public to the Salon. Unlike the exhibitions of the British Royal Academy, which charged the public an entrance fee, the French Salon was free until 1855, when it was part of the Exposition Universelle. That year turnstiles were installed, which counted 891,682 paying visitors.²⁷ (Incidentally, this is some 30,000 more than attended Documenta 13 in 2012—a remarkable indication of the Salon’s appeal as mass entertainment.) The numbers for the next Salon, two years later, are very interesting because Sundays were free: The 265,180 visitors the Salon attracted on that single day overwhelmingly outnumbered the 182,586 paying visitors from the rest of the week, proof that the Salon attracted a low-income crowd far beyond what we might think was the constituency for high art.²⁸ “I have seen bourgeois folks, workers, and even peasants,” Zola wrote in his “Salon of 1875.”²⁹

[Continued on next page]



Caricature of visitors to the 1880 Salon, Paris.

Anyone could visit the Salon, and did. But not everyone could exhibit at the Salon—far from it. It is this tension between the “absolute despotism” ruling over the artists’ fate and the “complete liberty” of access granted the public that I believe explains why modernism was born in France. Modernism was forced into existence by this tension; it offered itself as the only survival strategy for high art that adequately addressed its true conditions on the levels of both form and content. First Gustave Courbet and then Manet were its great experimenters, for both were fundamentally—if paradoxically—Salon painters. Such is the hypothesis that peeling the onion of Duchamp’s message has led me to entertain. If I am right, then the conditions of visibility within the Salon were not just a foil against which Courbet and Manet reacted. How they took those conditions into account, dealt with them, answered them, countered them, must be part and parcel of what defines modernism in painting. But that’s another story.³⁰

Duchamp’s message is mute when it comes to the definition of modernism in painting. It seems so future-oriented—announcing the coming of an art world where anything can be art—that it makes us forget how keyed to the past it actually was. From the retrospective view Duchamp enjoyed in 1917, looking onto the demise of the Beaux-Arts system, the message he put in the mail had nothing to say about the fate of painting after the 1880s. His brand of Cubism—not Pablo Picasso’s, not Cubism at large—was a dead end, and he knew it. And so Duchamp abandoned painting and switched to ready-mades. These in turn induced two or three generations of artists and critics, from the

1960s on, to believe that he had declared painting obsolete, whereas in truth he had embodied his melancholic longing for the painter's art in symbolically charged readymades such as *Peigne* (Comb), 1916, or in cryptic references to potential Seurat paintings.³¹ His cynicism, his dandyism, pushed him to side with those capable of seeing the emperor's new clothes, and too bad if they were conservative critics such as Edmond About, who, speaking of the demise of the Salon system, wrote in 1883:

*For twenty years, a revolution has been going on relentlessly, day by day, in this very special and interesting world. The high administrators who controlled it wanted to be popular; little by little they introduced democratic customs into what is and should always be an aristocracy. They sacrificed the elite to the numerous; they enthroned the universal suffrage of artists as if artists constituted a guild, as if the first comers, without having attended the École des beaux-arts and having no credentials other than faith and hope, had the right to call themselves artists.*³²

Duchamp would have grinned reading About. He nonetheless drew consequences for art—not so much from the demise of the jury system as from that system itself—that About would never have anticipated. They were diabolical. He was not responsible; he was, after all, merely the messenger.

Next month: “Part IV: The Invention of Non-Art (I): History”

[Thierry de Duve](#) is currently teaching at the School of Visual Arts in New York. In fall 2013, he was Kirk Varnedoe visiting professor at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.

Visit Artforum's archive at [Artforum.com](#) for the first two essays in de Duve's ongoing series: “Pardon my French” (October 2013) and “Don't Shoot the Messenger” (November 2013).



Eyre Crowe, *Delivery Entrance of Palais des Beaux Arts at the Exposition Universelle of 1855, 1855*, pen, ink wash, and graphite on paper, 8 3/4 x 12 5/8".

NOTES

(Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in French are the author's translation)

1. Quoted in Gérard-Georges Lemaire, *Esquisses en vue d'une histoire du Salon* (Paris: Henri Veyrier, 1986), 33. Planche was a literary and art critic for the *Revue des deux mondes*.

2. Quoted in W. Hauptman, "Juries, Protests, and Counter-exhibitions Before 1850," *Art Bulletin* 67, no. 1 (March 1985): 100. Alexandre de Cailleux was director of the Musées Royaux from 1841 to 1847 (and associate director from 1831 to 1841) and, as such, responsible for the organization of the Salon.

3. Marjorie Perloff, *Poetics in a New Key: Interviews and Essays*, ed. David Jonathan Y. Bayot (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Publishing House, 2013), 77.

4. I draw on the performative/constative distinction established by J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1962).

5. See Pierre Angrand, *Naissance des artistes indépendants 1884* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Debresse, 1965), 28–31.

6. Quoted in Dominique Lobstein, *Dictionnaire des Indépendants 1884–1914* (Dijon, France: Éditions L'échelle de Jacob, 2003), 20.

7. Quoted in Angrand, *Naissance des artistes*, 38–39.

8. *Ibid.*, 44.

9. *La Justice*, December 17, 1884, quoted in Angrand, *Naissance des artistes*, 87–88. The "exposition d'hiver," which was held as a fund-raiser to help the victims of a recent cholera epidemic, was the first to have been organized by the Société des Artistes Indépendants proper. Its official historiographer (and president from 1977 to 2001), Jean Monneret, keen on diminishing the importance of the spring exhibition because it could be claimed by the Groupe as well as by the Société, counts the winter exhibition as the first Salon des Indépendants, which it is not.

10. Quoted in Angrand, *Naissance des artistes*, 30; Angrand reconstitutes the meeting and introduces the anarchist's exclamation thus: "A young painter, the meeting's secretary, declares: 'The matter is to request either from the municipality or from the government itself a vast venue for the works that cannot be accommodated at the Palais de l'Industrie, for lack of place.' Already someone adds: 'This will force the government to prove its good or bad will,'" 29.

11. "In principle, all the members' works will be admitted. The members are due to hand the treasurer the sum of ten francs by way of contribution, for which they shall obtain a receipt." "Règlement, De l'admission," *Catalogue officiel et complet des ouvrages de peinture, sculpture, dessins et gravures exposés aux Tuileries, autorisé par le Ministre des Beaux-Arts et la Ville de Paris* (Paris: H. Delattre, 1884), 3. When the Société des Artistes Indépendants was founded in June, it set the price of membership at three francs every three months.

12. Harrison C. White and Cynthia A. White, *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965/1993).

13. For a discussion of the political implications of the name Intransigeants, see Stephen F. Eisenman, "The Intransigent Artist or How the Impressionists Got Their Name," in Charles S. Moffett, ed., *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874–1886* (Geneva: Richard Burton Publishers, 1986), 51–59.

14. For the chronology of the Impressionist exhibitions, see Joel Isaacson et al., *The Crisis of Impressionism 1878–1882* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1980).

15. See Patricia Mainardi, *The End of the Salon: Art and the State in the Early Third Republic* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 54 and 168 n. 61.

16. *Explication des ouvrages de peinture, sculpture, architecture, gravure et lithographie des artistes vivants exposés au Palais des Champs-Élysées le 1er mai 1880* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1880.)

17. On the 1880 Salon and its particular circumstances, see Émile Zola, “*Le naturalisme au Salon*,” in *Écrits sur l’art* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 409–16; Mainardi, *End of the Salon*, 72–89; Andrée Sfeir-Semler, *Die Maler am Pariser Salon 1791–1880* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 1992), 167–81.

18. Joris-Karl Huysmans, “*Le Salon officiel en 1880*,” in Lemaire, *Histoire du Salon*, 249.

19. *Explication des ouvrages de peinture, sculpture, architecture, gravure et lithographie des artistes vivants exposés au Palais des Champs-Élysées le 2 mai 1881*, (Paris: Charles de Mourgues, Frères, Imprimeurs des Musées Nationaux, 1881), lxxxiv and lxxxvi.

20. In spite of its name, the triennale, led on behalf of the state by Ernest Meissonier, had only one edition, in 1883. Meissonier was also very active in the creation, in 1890, of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, the last and narrowly nationalistic attempt at state control over the exhibitions.

21. Zola, “*Salon de 1876*,” in *Écrits sur l’art*, 321–22. Mainardi (*The End of the Salon*, 82) mentions two similar comments, an earlier one dated 1868, and a later one dated 1880. See Zola, 244 and 415.

22. Paul Smith, *Impressionism Beneath the Surface* (New York: Abrams, 1995), 9–10.

23. Albert Wolff, “*Courrier de Paris*,” *Le Figaro*, May 9, 1885, quoted in Mainardi, *End of the Salon*, 124.

24. It was usually in accordance with the Académie’s aesthetic principles during Louis-Philippe’s reign and divergent from them under the Third Republic. On the fluctuations of the state’s cultural policy and how they influenced the composition of the jury, see Sfeir-Semler, *Die Maler am Pariser Salon*, 115–49.

25. According to Sfeir-Semler (*Die Maler Pariser Salon*, 285–96; see 293 in particular), students of academicians did not fare better with the jury than did students of nonacademicians, and those who had studied with avant-garde painters were not discriminated against: 59 percent of the artists included in the famous 1863 Salon des Refusés (and thus excluded from the official Salon) had been students of an academician, versus 4 percent who had studied with a Romantic and 2 percent with a realist master. However, those numbers don’t mean much unless they are checked against the proportion of Romantics and realists among the refused artists’ masters in general. Although I find Sfeir-Semler’s thoroughly empirical, statistical study of the Salon extremely useful, I think she is sometimes carried away by her desire to rehabilitate Salon painting and to debunk the myth of “*1863, Naissance de la peinture moderne*” (to quote the title of Gaëtan Picon’s well-known book).

26. At the disastrous 1880 Salon, 140 artists had studied with Alexandre Cabanel, 135 with Jean-Léon Gérôme, 117 with Léon Cogniet, and 111 with Léon Bonnat, to mention only the stars of the educational system. Two years later, Cabanel could boast of having “placed” 176 students and Gérôme 117, whereas Bonnat, with 115 pupils, had bypassed Cogniet, with 91 pupils. (My statistics, culled from the catalogue of both Salons.) If anything, this shows that freeing the artists from the state-managed Salon did not upset in any way the privileges the artists who had studied with the “right” master enjoyed.

27. Sfeir-Semler, *Die Maler am Pariser Salon 1791–188*, 50.

28. *Ibid.*, 51.

29. “*J’ai vu des bourgeois, des ouvriers, et même des paysans*.” Zola, “*Salon de 1875*,” in *Ecrits sur l’art*, 281.

30. Now might be the time to announce that the present series of *Artforum* articles is the first part of a trilogy of sorts, the second part of which will be centered on Manet and the third on Marcel Broodthaers.

31. “The possible is an infra thin. The possibility of several tubes of paint becoming a Seurat is the concrete explanation of the possible as infra thin.” Marcel Duchamp, *Notes*, presented by Paul Matisse (Paris: Centre Georges

Pompidou, 1980), note 1, unpaginated. See my “The Readymade and the Tube of Paint” in *Artforum*, May 1986, 110–21.

32. Edmond About, “*Le deuxième Salon triennal*,” quoted in Mainardi, *End of the Salon*, 126.

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The Invention of Non-Art: A History

THIERRY DE DUVE ON THE SALON DES REFUSÉS

In the fourth in a series of new essays on the avant-garde for *Artforum*, historian and philosopher [Thierry de Duve](#) continues his groundbreaking excavation of the meaning of Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 *Fountain*. Here, de Duve argues that to locate the source of the readymade’s legendary insurrection against the category of art, we must look to an even earlier schism: the 1863 exhibition of art rejected from the hallowed French Beaux-Arts institution of the Salon. For it is at the so-called Salon des Refusés—and in the debates that erupted around the work of its most famous participant, Édouard Manet—that we find the public emergence of “non-art” in words and in images alike. The sea change is one we do not yet fully understand, but that ushered in the aesthetic conditions under which we are still living today.



Édouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Luncheon on the Grass), 1863, oil on canvas, 81 7/8 x 104 1/8".

*After all, according to what criterion should artistic production be judged, if not by its dialectical capacities of critical negativity and utopian anticipation?*¹

—Benjamin H. D. Buchloh

I DON'T KNOW WHO COINED THE EXPRESSION “NON-ART.” But I remember that “non-art” and its supposed twin, “anti-art,” were very much in fashion in the art criticism of the 1960s. The terms were used to refer to Dada and early Pop art, then seen as “Neo-Dada.” However, by the mid-'70s, critics had realized that Pop art owed very little to the nihilistic thrust of the Dadaists. To imagine Robert Rauschenberg shouting with Hugo Ball at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich had become counterintuitive; attention had shifted from Dada to the *Neo* in *Neo-Dada*, from the revolution to its recuperation. Consequently, “non-art” and “anti-art” fell out of fashion. It was clear to everyone in the art world that the aggressiveness of anti-art had been tamed, that the negativity of non-art had been in turn negated, sublated, or otherwise mutated into positivity.

Not everyone greeted the erasure of non-art's negativity with indifference or resignation. The epigraph above—by one of the best among those art critics I once called the last partisans of the avant-garde²—is exemplary of a school of thought for which negation is an instrument of resistance against the fetishization of artworks promoted by the capitalist socioeconomic order. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's quest for the right criterion according to which to judge artistic production is, in fact, the remote yet direct descendant of Stendhal's famous line, “Beauty is but the promise of happiness”—rephrased in the post-Adornian lingo that stresses the sobering, skeptical “but” of Stendhal's phrase to imply “critical negativity.” Meanwhile, Buchloh's invocation of “dialectical capacities” rekindles Adorno's paradoxical reading of Stendhal: “Art must break its promise in order to stay true to it.”³ The 2012 essay from which I took this epigraph, “Farewell to an Identity,” is a strong, salutary, and coherent, if rather despairing protest against the appalling spectacularization fashionable art has reached in today's world. I cannot recommend its reading enough. But it is 100 percent persuasive only to those readers who share Buchloh's post-Adornian convictions. Unfortunately, I don't count myself in that group.⁴

One way of expressing my doubts without venturing onto philosophical terrain is to state my incomprehension of Buchloh's take on Marcel Duchamp. In the past, he has repeatedly praised Duchamp for critically updating art production for the industrial age and for undermining bourgeois authorship. In “Farewell to an Identity,” these achievements are subsumed under “the principle of a total de-skilling, as embodied in Duchamp's work.”⁵ I can see how de-skilling can be invoked to convey an avant-gardist attack against craftsmanship and authorial agency; I don't see how it applies to Duchamp's work as a whole. The readymades can indeed be seen as de-skilled in a trivial sense, but then only if they are cut off from the rest of Duchamp's oeuvre—I'm thinking especially of the artist's *Large Glass*, 1915–23, and of the eight years of meticulous, highly skilled manual labor it took the artist to fabricate it. It seems a little off the mark to hail Duchamp for his presumed de-skilling and subversion of bourgeois authorship. I'd say his assumption of authorship was bourgeois with a vengeance—dandyish and thus falsely aristocratic, that is.



Paul Delaroche, *Hémicycle* (detail), 1841–42, fresco, 12' 9" x 81' 11 7/8".

I have already quoted Robert Smithson's poor opinion of Duchamp.⁶ Here is Carl Andre's: "Duchamp I cannot take. I think the archness and the utter gentility of refinement of it all, it's just for giggling ladies on the Upper East Side or something; it's salon art."⁷ It may be cruel on Andre's part to send Duchamp to have tea on the Upper East Side. But it sounds less far-fetched than to portray him as a fellow traveler of the Soviet Productivists, as Buchloh and others have occasionally done. Actually, in a less disparaging sense than Andre's, *salon artist* is, historically speaking, the epithet Duchamp most deserves. In some deep and very unexpected way, he belongs in the nineteenth-century French Salon.

As I have previously argued, when the message Duchamp put in the mail in 1917 with *Fountain* arrived in the '60s, it revealed, like an onion, multiple layers of meaning. A first layer—when a urinal is art, anything can be art—was soon misread as implying a second layer: that anyone could be an artist. Once that misreading is dispelled and the chronology of the facts is reestablished, the implication gets reversed: Given that in 1917, anyone could be a member of the New York Society of Independent Artists, and given that the Society was modeled after the Paris Société des Artistes Indépendants, founded in 1884, it follows that anything could be art as early as 1884. What this really amounts to is a third layer: the announcement that, by 1884, the French Beaux-Arts system had collapsed. One unique characteristic of that system was the monopoly the Beaux-Arts state apparatus had over the careers of artists, and the fact, essential to the fourth layer of Duchamp's message, that it exerted its monopoly exclusively through the institution of the Salon jury: Year after year, Salon after Salon, all artists with professional ambitions had to pass under the yoke of the jury until (or unless) they were medaled and henceforth exempted. It is tempting to jump to the conclusion that Duchamp's message contains a critique—Buchloh would say a "dialectical negation"—of the Salon jury system. Negations are at issue, certainly. But why would Duchamp criticize and negate an institution that had died in the 1880s, before his birth? In fact, he sought to *revive* that institution when he sent *Fountain* to the Independents' show: He forced the hanging committee to act as a jury and to make him the sole victim of a *salon des refusés*.⁸ Negation was on the side of the committee, not of the artist. As we shall now see, the fourth layer of Duchamp's message doesn't negate anything. Rather, it sends us to investigate the circumstances under which negation made its historical appearance in the judgment of art as art. Those circumstances should not be confused with the moment—whenever that was—when the expression "non-art" was coined. Duchamp's message dispatches us to the time and place in which the pragmatic, discursive reality of non-art was established. It is not New York in 1917, it is not Zurich in 1916, it is Paris some fifty-three years before.

THE TITLE OF THIS ESSAY, "The Invention of Non-Art," is in some ways a misnomer, since non-art was more discovered than invented; it was no one's intention to bring non-art into the world. True, the Dadaists at the Cabaret Voltaire intentionally fought the establishment and may thus perhaps be said to have invented anti-art. But they could do so because anti-art's supposed twin, non-art, had established the prerequisite for anti-art long before. As for Duchamp, he has been called an artist, an anti-artist, and an *anartist*, little matter; he was the messenger of non-art. He did not invent it any more than the other Dadaists. He noticed its existence more clearly, and he brought us the news.

Non-art came into being inadvertently, in five successive stages and at the confluence of four factors. We will visit the five stages as we go along, each one made visible by a particular event. The four factors are: (1) the existence of the Beaux-Arts system and the classification of the arts within it; (2) the "all or nothing" paradigm resulting from the binary character of the jury's verdict at the Salon; (3) the convergence of aesthetic expectations in the notion of the tableau; and (4) the psychology of the jury.

The appellation Beaux-Arts refers to arts in the plural and calls them beautiful, something that gets lost in the English "fine arts." Of course, this doesn't mean that all works produced in this system were beautiful but, rather, that the Beaux-Arts strove for beauty as opposed to utility or pleasantness. As for the plurality of the arts, since the relevant context was the nineteenth-century French Salon, how were the visual arts divided there? What was their hierarchy? How did their division and hierarchy evolve over time? What we can gather from a brief inquiry into the titles of the Salon catalogues is a remarkably stable division of visual practices, with a clear hierarchy that puts painting on top, followed by sculpture.⁹ Within painting, moreover, the supremacy of history painting remained in force until well into the second third of the nineteenth century, even as its dominance was eroded by the growing popularity of genre and landscape painting and the advent of a watered-down version of history painting, the *genre historique*.

Perhaps the most significant self-portrait of the Beaux-Arts system was provided by one of the first and best proponents of the *genre historique*, Paul Delaroche, when he was commissioned to allegorize the system as a whole by decorating the hemicycle of the École des Beaux-Arts. He aligned a string of (all male!) painters, sculptors, and architects from antiquity to the seventeenth century (and not beyond!) on either side of a central group comprising three seated ancients—the architect Ictinus, the painter Apelles, and the sculptor Phidias—flanked by an allegory of Gothic art on the left and an allegory of the Renaissance on the right, while on the proscenium the *génie des arts* (in the plural) get ready to hand out wreaths of laurels to deserving students.¹⁰ The ideological message is clear: The Beaux-Arts system has been in place since antiquity; the history of art is a genealogy of great, exemplary men; there are three seats for artists to occupy, and occupy a seat they must. All artists are draftsmen; the printmakers are either painters or subordinate to painters; hybrids such as bas-relief do exist, but its straddling of painting and sculpture has been codified since Donatello. In the Beaux-Arts system (in France and elsewhere), a plurality of well-separated art practices with nothing in between is the rule. For something to be art, it must either be a painting or a sculpture, and so on, or—to extend the categories beyond the visual arts—a poem, a piece of music, a play, etc.¹¹ The implication is that if a given object were to fall in the no-man’s-land between the acknowledged art practices, we would be hard-pressed to call it art at all.



Max Berthelin's 1854 crosssection rendering of the Palais de l'Industrie, Paris, site of the Salon des Refusés, 1863.

The second factor in the birth of non-art is the binary character of the jury’s verdict at the Salon, and the way in which it set an “all or nothing” paradigm for aesthetic judgment. Aesthetic experience involves judging along a continuous gradation of quality, and there is no reason to think that the Salon jury experienced art any differently.¹² Although the composition of the jury varies throughout the nineteenth century—the jurors were sometimes state appointees, sometimes elected by the artists, and sometimes chosen from both groups—the majority were most often artists. To give just one example, the 1868 jury comprised eighteen men: five members of the Institut de France; one professor at the École des Beaux-Arts; three future academicians; three outsiders with respect to the academy; and six state appointees who were not artists.¹³ Not only did the artists dominate, but in this particular jury all were painters—a striking indicator of the hierarchy still prevalent under the Second Empire. All were highly skilled professionals trained in the appreciation of works of art, capable of making subtle judgments, and whose personal preferences covered a wide range of schools and tastes. But no matter how generously we imagine the jury’s goodwill and fairness, in practice its deliberations had to be expedited in record time, leaving little room for nuanced discussion.¹⁴ Moreover, the jury’s hand was forced. It saw a brutal either/or superimposed on even the most fine-tuned evaluation of so many shades of quality. Either a work was admitted into the Salon or it was rejected, there was no middle ground. If it was admitted, the jury could avail itself of a whole system of first-, second-, and third-class medals to express the warmth of its admiration, but first it must be admitted. One work might be admitted while another by the same artist might be rejected. Repeated rejection over the years could make an artist’s career extremely difficult. Not before the Impressionists did artists boycott the Salon and rely on their dealers to promote their work. Only with the collapse of the Beaux-Arts system in the 1880s did visibility at the Salon cease to be the sine qua non condition of—and success at the Salon the mandatory path toward—a profitable livelihood as a professional artist. It is thus not an exaggeration to say that, funneled through the decisive verdict of the Salon jury, careers were made and unmade at the Salon.

The nineteenth century is punctuated with protests—not so much against the jury’s conservatism, as the triumphalist histories of modern art routinely assume, as against its severity and arbitrariness. After the jury of the 1827 Salon

eliminated 1,635 works out of 3,469, Étienne-Jean Delécluze, Jacques-Louis David's pupil and biographer, who usually sided with the administration, was so outraged that he proposed an *exhibition particulière* at the Galerie Lebrun, which the press hailed as a "*salon d'opposition*."¹⁵ (The expression "salon des refusés" had not been coined yet.) In 1840, the ratio of rejected works climbed to an unprecedented 54 percent.¹⁶ Étienne Huard, a liberal critic for the *Journal des Artistes*, appealed to the public to protest against such unspeakable acts of censorship and urged the artists to show the rejected works in the Galeries Artistiques on boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle.¹⁷ In the end, the show was a flop: Many artists chickened out for fear of retaliation or out of shame over their rejection from the Salon.

By contrast, the rejected artists of 1863—the year of the Salon des Refusés proper—were shielded from fear and shame because this time the exhibition of the refused works was held under the auspices of His Majesty the Emperor. Having heard of the artists' protests, Napoleon III ignored the jury and used his supreme authority to grant the rejected artists an exhibition space next to the official Salon. No doubt he did this out of demagoguery and not because he disagreed with the jury's taste, but the result was the same. It is a mistake, then, to read the Salon des Refusés as an "alternative" exhibition and as the glorious revenge of the avant-garde against academicism: The public flocked to the Refusés mainly to laugh at the rejected works, and in many instances the crowd was right. As the critic Jules-Antoine Castagnary wrote in *L'Artiste*, "Before the exhibition of the Refused, we were unable to figure out what a bad painting was. Now we know it."¹⁸

That's the point. That's why I consider the Salon des Refusés the first stage in the invention of non-art. Not that I share Castagnary's wholesale rejection of the rejected: I mean that the public of 1863 had, for the first and almost only time, simultaneous access to good art and bad art in separate "boxes." At the official Salon they could see art the jury judged good enough, and at the *Salon annexe* art not good enough to be shown. Together with the art in these categories, the categories themselves were suddenly made plain. Both the public and the artists could experience in person the binary structure of the one aesthetic judgment that counted: The artists were finally shown what *not* to do if they wanted to please the jury; and the spectators were confronted with the arbitrariness of a new "all or nothing" paradigm of aesthetic judgment.



— Mon fils! ôtez votre casquette! honneur au courage malheureux.

Charles Amédée de Noé's cartoon published in *Cham au Salon de 1863: Deuxième promenade* (Martinet Paris, 1863). Caption reads: "My son, remove your cap! Pay your respects to the failed attempt."

Among the works rejected by the 1863 Salon and shown at the Refusés were three paintings by Édouard Manet:

Young Man in the Costume of a Majo, 1863; *Mademoiselle V. . . in the Costume of an Espada*, 1862; and *Le Bain* (The Bath) (now called *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* [Luncheon on the Grass]), 1863. There are no minutes of the jury's meetings, so in order to gain an idea of what its expectations might have been, we must turn to Salon criticism of the time. "There has been a lot of excitement about this young man. Let's be serious. The *Bath*, the *Majo*, the *Espada* are good sketches, I will grant you. . . . But then what? Is this drawing? Is this painting?" Castagnary asks.¹⁹

"*Est-ce là dessiner? Est-ce là peindre?*" Note that Castagnary does not ask whether the drawing or the painting is good, but whether Manet's skill amounts to drawing or painting at all. At stake is not just the quality of the object, but also its very identity. As Michael Fried has argued (and I rely heavily on him here), the art criticism of the 1860s revolved around a notion that kept in focus all other aesthetic expectations—such as the demand for finish, for balance, for composition—a notion precisely capable of giving a painting its very identity qua painting: the notion of the *tableau*.²⁰ It is with respect to this notion that most critics found Manet wanting. Here is Théodore Pelloquet's view on *Le Bain*:

*M. Manet doesn't know how to compose a tableau, or rather; he has no idea of what is meant by a tableau. . . . When he places two or three nude figures [sic] on a large canvas, next to two or three of others wearing an overcoat, in the middle of a landscape hastily brushed in, I wish he had helped me understand his intention. I'm not asking him some philosophical lesson, rather the visible translation of some impression. I'm looking for his and can't find it; it is a rebus blown out of proportion, which no one will ever unravel.*²¹

The metaphor of the rebus occurs more than once; for example, under the pen of Louis Étienne: "I search in vain for the meaning of this unbecoming rebus."²² Failure to read a rebus leaves the viewer to struggle with a meaningless string of unrelated fragments, a disparate collection of *morceaux* never adding to a whole. In the criticism and shoptalk of the time, the word *morceau* was the dialectical counterpart of *tableau*. Alphonse Legros, Manet's colleague in what Fried calls the generation of 1863, expressed this dialectic elegantly: "I would call tableaux all successful *morceaux* that naturally make a composition without seeking to be one."²³ More often than not, the critics judged that Manet could pull off successful *morceaux*, which, however, did not amount to a *tableau*.²⁴ In 1870, Castagnary concluded:

*I have nothing to say about this painter who for ten years seems to have made it his task in each Salon to show us that he possesses part of the qualities necessary to make tableaux. I don't deny those qualities; but I'm waiting for the tableaux.*²⁵

The convergence of aesthetic expectations on the notion of the *tableau* is the third factor that I believe explains the birth of non-art as a side effect of the institutionalized verdict of the Salon jury. It comes to reinforce the first two factors—the strong divisions between the arts in the Beaux-Arts system and the "all or nothing" consequence of the jury's aesthetic judgment—so that if a canvas does not fully qualify as a *tableau* and is rejected on these grounds, then it is prone to fall into a limbo of sorts. This limbo, I argue, constitutes non-art. But for this limbo to acquire theoretical consistency, a fourth factor is needed: the explicit denial of all artistic qualities—and I mean denial in a quasi-Freudian sense, that is, an involuntary admission of a truth in the guise of its negation.²⁶ The word *no* must be uttered, and its true, unacknowledged meaning must be "yes."



Édouard Manet, *La Gare Saint-Lazare (The Railway)*, 1873, oil on canvas, 36 3/4 x 43 7/8".

Let's remember that the majority of the Salon jurors were artists; we might want to look into the psychology behind their decisions. I'll take my clue from Leo Steinberg: "Whenever there appears an art that is truly new and original, the men who denounce it first and loudest are artists." This is from his well-known 1962 article titled "Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public," which I find very moving and so relevant to the matter at hand that I'm tempted to retitile it "Salon Art and the Plight of Its Jury." "As to the 'plight,'" Steinberg writes, "here I mean simply the shock of discomfort, or the bewilderment or the anger or the boredom which some people always feel, and all people sometimes feel, when confronted with an unfamiliar new style."²⁷ The article contains the avowal of Steinberg's own reaction to "an unfamiliar new style"—a reaction that I think is very close to what must have been that of the Salon jury when confronted with Manet's *Le Bain*. Recalling his response to Jasper Johns's first one-man show in New York in 1958, Steinberg writes:

I disliked the show, and would gladly have thought it a bore. Yet it depressed me and I wasn't sure why. Then I began to recognize in myself all the classical symptoms of a philistine's reaction to modern art. I was angry at the artist. . . . I was irritated at some of my friends for pretending to like it—but with an uneasy suspicion that perhaps they did like it, so that I was really mad at myself for being so dull, and at the whole situation for showing me up. And meanwhile, the pictures remained with me—working on me and depressing me. . . . If I disliked these things, why not ignore them? It was not that simple. For what really depressed me was what I felt these works were able to do to all other art. The pictures of de Kooning and Kline, it seemed to me, were suddenly tossed into one pot with Rembrandt and Giotto.²⁸

If an observer of contemporary art as unprejudiced as Steinberg admits that a new, unexpected work is able to throw him into such a state of depression, you can imagine how upset the Salon jurors must have been in 1863 when they had to appraise Manet's *Le Bain*. How much easier it must have been for them to judge that it was not a tableau worthy of the name, rather than to recognize that it was done by a painter who, they must have sensed, surpassed them all. We can hear them exclaim: "That's not a tableau, that's not painting!" And we would not fail to hear, in the tone of their outcry, the "discomfort, or the bewilderment or the anger or the boredom"—I'd say anger more than boredom—or other such signs of emotional turmoil that give their exclamation away for the denial it really is. As surely as the analysand's protest that the thought of killing his father never crossed his mind rings as an avowal of his Oedipus complex to the psychoanalyst's ear, so "That's not a tableau!" rings to the art historian's ear as an unacknowledged avowal of the jury's plight. The jurors *knew* that with *Le Bain* Manet had radically redefined the tableau; they just couldn't stand it.

The one feature of denials that is crucial to my argument is that if they didn't betray themselves through the anxious or rushed tone of their delivery, they would sound utterly rational. The signifier of a denial—the word *no*—is not different from the symbol of ordinary logical negation; there is no difference in discursive appearance between denials and negations. Indeed, denial actually forms a subcategory of grammatical negation in general: It is a "yes" disguised as a "no." The inadvertent invention of non-art hinges on that lack of perceptible difference and on the confusion it allows.

I HAVE CLAIMED that the invention of non-art took place at the confluence of four factors—we possess them now, the fourth being the jury's denial—but also that it required the succession of five stages or events, and we have not yet gotten beyond the first of these, the Salon des Refusés. The second stage or event involves a variation on the binary structure of the Refusés, and it is crucial because it names the tableau criterion explicitly and formally ushers in negation, thereby making room for the confusion between negation and denial. In 1874, Manet submits four works to the Salon. While *La Gare Saint-Lazare (The Railway)*, 1873, and a watercolor are accepted, *Bal masqué à l'opéra (Masked Ball at the Opera)*, 1873, and *Les Hirondelles (The Swallows)*, 1873, are rejected. The poet Stéphane Mallarmé rushes to Manet's defense in an article where he writes:

*Entrusted with the nebulous vote of the painters with the responsibility of choosing, from among the framed pictures offered, those that are truly tableaux in order to show them to us, the jury has nothing else to say but: this is a tableau, or that is not a tableau.*²⁹



Édouard Manet, *Bal masqué à l'opéra* (Masked Ball at the Opera), 1873, oil on canvas, 23 1/4 x 28 5/8".

Mallarmé is well aware that the worst “framed pictures” are tableaux, nominally speaking; he invites the jury to separate them aesthetically from “*ce qu’il existe véritablement de tableaux.*” Let the jurors abstain from all judgment of taste beyond this elementary assessment and let the public decide which pictures, among those that are *truly* paintings, are *good* paintings; which pictures, among those that are tableaux worthy of the name, are tableaux worthy of the public’s praise. What is very curious in Mallarmé’s admonishment to the jury is that, in practice, the jury already does what the poet exhorts it to do. It has no other choice but to obey the “all or nothing” paradigm that rules over its aesthetic judgment. Mallarmé may be thinking that he is urging the jury to adopt a new behavior; his protest actually acknowledges receipt of the new paradigm and puts words to it: *Ceci est un tableau. Voilà qui n’est point un tableau.* In comparison with the latter judgment, phrases such as “This painting is ugly, unfinished, or terribly executed” don’t have the same power of undermining the ontological nature of the judged object and thus of threatening its status as art. Delacroix already recognized this threat when he said that the painter

*cannot take an isolated morceau or even a collection of morceaux and make a tableau out of it. One should make sure to circumscribe the idea so that the mind of the spectator doesn’t hover over a whole necessarily cut into pieces: otherwise, there would be no art.*³⁰

There would be no art—in the singular. Delacroix had died in August 1863, a few weeks after the Salon des Refusés ended. If he visited it and saw *Le Bain*, which is doubtful, he never expressed his opinion. My guess is that despite his possible irritation he would not have refused that painting the quality of a tableau; he would have displayed the same intelligent openness as Steinberg when the latter set out to write on the very paintings that had so depressed him a few years before.³¹ Not so the 1874 jury: The jurors took Delacroix at his word and masqueraded their emotional denial as reasoned negation. Like *Le Bain* in 1863, Manet’s *Masked Ball at the Opera* fell into the limbo of non-art in 1874.

Ten years later, in 1884, the Société des Artistes Indépendants was founded, and this event signaled the third stage in the invention—or, better, the discovery—of non-art, each stage bringing us closer to full awareness of the existence of such a limbo. Of crucial importance to this third stage is that the Société’s no-jury rule implicitly contained the a priori admission that anything a member would present counted as potential art. What the Société did not foresee, even though it logically followed from its no-jury rule, was that a *betrayal* of said rule automatically

amounted to the *denial* of the rejected work's potential art status. Whatever the Société refused to show would ipso facto be tossed into the limbo of non-art, where it would keep company with *Le Bain*, *Masked Ball at the Opera*, and all the other paintings that had been banned from public view over the years because the Salon jurors could not, would not, admit that the works were tableaux worthy of the name.

There is to my knowledge no other record of the Société betraying its no-jury rule and rejecting the work of one of its members other than the episode when Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)* was expelled from the 1912 Salon des Indépendants, presumably for not being a *tableau cubiste* worthy of the name. With that event, the fourth stage in the birth of non-art was reached. The event on which the fifth and last stage hinged now leaps to the eye: It is the repetition of the Société's betrayal by its American carbon copy, the New York Society of Independent Artists, in 1917. Of course this time around, the repetition was contrived; the betrayal was shrewdly anticipated; Duchamp *planned* that the urinal "innocently" handed in by Richard Mutt would be refused and would thus be tossed into the limbo of non-art. He was able to do so because he had firsthand experience of an object in the nature of *Le Bain* having been tossed into it, a painful experience he would neither forget nor forgive: The *Fountain* episode was the voluntary and vengeful replay of the *Nude Descending a Staircase* episode. It brought the invention or discovery—both words are in the end equally inadequate—of non-art full circle when Duchamp published the photo of R. Mutt's *urinal* in *The Blind Man*, with the triple caption: "Fountain by R. Mutt"; "Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz"; "THE EXHIBIT REFUSED BY THE INDEPENDENTS." With that photo, Duchamp pulled R. Mutt's *urinal* from the limbo of non-art and patiently waited for the art critics of the '60s and '70s to fall into his trap—and to make non-art a subcategory of art.

Don't ask whether Duchamp was fully conscious of having put a message in the mail with *Fountain*, a message that, once peeled, onion-like, reveals him as the messenger of non-art. Ask, rather, if there are more layers to the onion. There should be at least one: The circumstances of the progressive birth of non-art are congruent with the time and place in which the Beaux-Arts institution collapsed. When one institution collapses, another takes its place: History, like nature, abhors a vacuum. The new institution, in which we still live and which I call Art-in-General, has *negativity* branded on its birth certificate—negativity resting on *betrayal* and fueled by *denial*. I doubt it's the kind of dialectically *positive* negativity Buchloh has in mind when he argues that artistic production should be judged "by its dialectical capacities of critical negativity and utopian anticipation"—but who knows? Ask the messenger, read the message, there is still more to it.

Thierry de Duve is currently teaching at the School of Visual Arts in New York. In fall 2013, he was Kirk Varnedoe visiting professor at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.

Next month: "Part V: The Invention of Non-Art—Theory"

Visit *Artforum*'s archive at Artforum.com for the first three essays in de Duve's ongoing series "Pardon My French" (October 2013), "Don't Shoot the Messenger" (November 2013), and "Why Was Modernism Born in France?" (January 2014).

NOTES

(Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in French are the author's translation.)

1. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Farewell to an Identity," *Artforum*, December 2012, 257.
2. See my book *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). Chapter eight, "Archaeology of Practical Modernism," raises the question of whether art retains its critical function when it is cut off from the Enlightenment's emancipation project.
3. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1999), 311.

4. See my “Resisting Adorno, Revamping Kant,” in *Art and Aesthetics After Adorno*, ed. Anthony J. Cascardi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 249–99.
5. Buchloh, “Farewell to an Identity,” 258. On the concept of de-skilling, see John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (New York: Verso, 2007).
6. See my “Don’t Shoot the Messenger,” *Artforum*, November 2013, 267.
7. Paul Cummings, “Taped Interview with Carl Andre,” 1972, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. As quoted in Carl Andre, *Cuts: Texts 1959–2004*, ed. James Meyer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 91.
8. In a letter to his sister Suzanne dated April 11, 1917, Duchamp writes: “I would like to have a special exhibition of the people who were refused at the Independents—but that would be a redundancy! And the urinal would have been *lonely*.” Francis Naumann, ed., “Affectueusement, Marcel: Ten Letters from Marcel Duchamp to Suzanne Duchamp and Jean Crotti,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 22, no. 4 (1982): 8.
9. Here are a few such titles of Salon catalogues: *Explication des peintures, sculptures et autres ouvrages de messieurs de l’académie royale* (1737); *Ouvrages de peinture, sculpture, et architecture, gravure, dessins, modèles, exposés au Louvre par ordre de l’Assemblée Nationale, au mois de septembre 1791, l’an III^e de la Liberté* (1791); *Explication des ouvrages de peinture, sculpture, architecture, gravure, et lithographie des artistes vivants* (1848); *Catalogue des ouvrages de peinture, sculpture, gravure, lithographie, et architecture* (1863).
10. See Stephen Bann, *Paul Delaroche: History Painted* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 200–27.
11. I am referring here to empirical object-identification. This does not preclude sophisticated intersections on the art-theoretical level, such as the *ut pictura poesis* doctrine, and even less so ontological speculation on the question of why there are several arts rather than one, and why, as Jean-Luc Nancy has argued, they *touch* (and don’t overlap) each other. See Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).
12. In an endnote on page 619 of *Manet’s Modernism: or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), Michael Fried offers this comment to what I had written in “The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas” (chapter four of *Kant After Duchamp*): “Incidentally, de Duve believes that with the Salon des Refusés ‘the aesthetic judgment was structurally cast into the binary form “either/or,” substituting for the continuous scale of “taste”’ and that ‘the ubiquity of the paradigm of refusal (together with the very existence of public salons) was largely responsible for the fact that the phenomenon of the avant-garde was born in France’ (310n 97). My reading of the pertinent texts suggests, however, that a criticism based on ‘the continuous scale of “taste”’ came into being only in the wake of Impressionism, which is not to say that de Duve is wrong to associate the rise of the avant-garde at least partly with a critical binarism that was strongly in evidence throughout Manet’s career.” My argument today is more complex than at the time of *Kant After Duchamp*: I no longer believe that the Salon des Refusés simply *substituted* an “either/or” for the continuous scale of taste. I rather maintain that the Salon des Refusés brought into the open the *superimposition* of an “either/or” onto the continuous scale of aesthetic experience, a superimposition which had been a feature of the Salon ever since the jury was instituted. Fried may be right in claiming that *criticism based on* the continuous scale of taste came into being only in the wake of Impressionism. That is an issue different from the phenomenology of aesthetic experience, which we have no reason to believe changed significantly in such a short historical time span as 1850–80.
13. The five members of the Institut were Isidore Pils, Alexandre Cabanel, Louis-Nicolas Cabat, Tony Robert-Fleury, and Jean-Léon Gérôme. The professor at the École des Beaux-Arts was Charles Gleyre. The three future academicians were Jules Breton, François-Louis Français, and Paul Baudry. The three outsiders with respect to the academy were Alexandre Bida, Eugène Fromentin, and Charles-François Daubigny. And the six state appointees who were not artists were Alfred Arago, Charles Blanc, Cottier (first name unknown), Théophile Gautier, Louis La Caze, and the minister Maison. See Andrée Sfeir-Semler, *Die Maler am Pariser Salon 1791–1880* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1992), 144.

14. For example, the jury of the 1847 Salon held thirteen five-hour-long sessions to appraise 4,883 works, which comes down to forty-eight seconds per work on average. Sfeir-Semler, *Die Maler am Pariser Salon*, 126–27.
15. Sfeir-Semler, *Die Maler am Pariser Salon*, 122.
16. Out of 3,996 submitted works, 2,147 were refused. *Ibid.*, 41.
17. William Hauptman, “Juries, Protests, and Counter-Exhibitions before 1850,” *Art Bulletin* 57, no. 1 (1985): 100.
18. Jules-Antoine Castagnary, quoted by Gérard-Georges Lemaire, *Esquisses en vue d’une histoire du Salon* (Paris: Henri Veyrier, 1986), 54.
19. Jules-Antoine Castagnary, “Salon de 1863,” *L’Artiste*, August 15, 1863; quoted in Pierre Courthion and Pierre Cailler, eds., *Manet raconté par lui-même et ses amis*, II (Genève: Pierre Cailler, 1953), 237.
20. Fried, *Manet’s Modernism*, 267–80.
21. Théodore Pelloquet, *L’Exposition: Journal du Salon de 1863*, July 23, 1863. Fried cites a slightly different translation and gives the French in an endnote (*Manet’s Modernism*, 272 and 560n20).
22. Louis Étienne, *Le Jury et les exposants: Salon des Refusés* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1863), 30; quoted in George Heard Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics* (New York: Norton, 1969), 45. The French, “*Je cherche en vain ce que peut signifier ce logogriphe peu séant*,” is given by Fried (*Manet’s Modernism*, 570n82).
23. Alphonse Legros, letter to Henri Fantin-Latour, dated February 17, 1858, quoted in a different (and inadequate) translation by Fried, who gives the French in an endnote (*Manet’s Modernism*, 272 and 560n22).
24. Thus Théophile Thoré: “I can’t imagine what made an artist of such intelligence and refinement select so absurd a composition. . . . But there are qualities of color and light in the landscape, and even very convincing bits of modeling [*morceaux de modelé*] in the woman’s body.” Quoted in Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics*, 50. (Translation slightly modified.)
25. Castagnary, “Salon de 1870,” 429; quoted by Fried, who gives the French in an endnote (*Manet’s Modernism*, 272 and 560n21).
26. Sigmund Freud’s word for denial is *Verneinung*, to be distinguished from both *Verleugnung* (disavowal) and *Verwerfung* (rejection, Lacan’s *forclusion*). Contrary to the cases of denial analyzed by Freud, the jury’s denial involves *involuntary* but not necessarily *unconscious* admission of a truth under the guise of its negation.
27. Leo Steinberg, “Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Public,” in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 5.
28. Steinberg, “Contemporary Art,” 12.
29. “*Ceci est un tableau, ou encore: Voilà qui n’est point un tableau.*” Stéphane Mallarmé, “*Le Jury de peinture pour 1874 et M. Manet*,” *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1945), 699. I quote from Hamilton’s translation (*Manet and His Critics*, 184), with the French “*tableau*” restored for Hamilton’s “*painting*.” In a footnote on page 281 of *Manet’s Modernism* that discusses Vincent Descombes’s comment on whether Mallarmé’s notion of the tableau responded to specific criteria (Descombes answers negatively), Fried writes: “The problem Manet encountered was that Salon juries and all but a few critics behaved *as if there were* criteria for *tableaux* which his submissions shockingly failed to satisfy.” The question of criteria is a huge one for aesthetic theory. I avoid raising it here by using the word *expectations* instead.

30. Eugène Delacroix, “*L’Idéal et le réalisme*,” *L’Artiste*, June 1, 1868, 339. Fried cites a slightly different translation and gives the French in an endnote (*Manet’s Modernism*, 269 and 558n11).

31. Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of his Art,” in *Other Criteria*, 17–54.

[March 2014](#)

The Invention of Non-Art: A Theory

THIERRY DE DUVE ON THE RISE OF THE ART-IN-GENERAL SYSTEM

IN THE FIFTH OF THE SERIES of new essays on the avant-garde for *Artforum*, historian and philosopher [Thierry de Duve](#) investigates the ideas behind one of modernism’s most notorious inventions: non-art, that vexing category of things that reject, trouble, and ultimately expand the definition of art itself. From the nineteenth-century Beaux-Arts system to Marcel Duchamp’s radical readymade *Fountain*, 1917, to the pluralism of the present day; from the fin-de-siècle ruminations of Stéphane Mallarmé to the aesthetic pronouncements of Clement Greenberg, de Duve reveals the astonishing theoretical implications of non-art—as term, as idea, and as type. In the process, he offers a groundbreaking narrative for the emergence of our contemporary understanding of art.



Unknown artist (formerly attributed to Piero della Francesca), *Città Ideale (Ideal City)*, ca. 1480, oil on panel, 23 1/2 x 79".

*You can only make absolute statements negatively.*¹

—Ad Reinhardt

IN 1966, DONALD JUDD, reflecting on a widespread debate in contemporary art circles, wrote in a somewhat exasperated tone: “‘Non-art,’ ‘anti-art,’ ‘non-art art’ and ‘anti-art art’ are useless. If someone says his work is art, it’s art.”² The sovereign naming power that Judd granted himself and his fellow artists here is remarkable. Those of us who are not artists, or who are rival artists, might object to such a fiat. Those who are critics, gallery owners, museum curators, or collectors might object less to this fiat than to its appropriation by the sole artist. Well, the objection seems to have been vindicated: By the beginning of the 1980s, the power of calling something art had

purportedly shifted from the artist to the institution of art as a whole. In the words of one critic, the late Thomas McEvelley:

*To be art is to be called art, by the people who supposedly are in charge . . . artists, critics, curators, art historians, and so on. . . . If something (anything) is presented as art by an artist and contextualized as art within the system then it is art, and there is nothing anybody can do about it.*³

There is a lot you can do about it, starting with not letting yourself be intimidated by “the people who supposedly are in charge,” and ending with the construction of an aesthetic theory of art that offers a viable alternative to the nominalism of institutional theories such as McEvelley’s.

Constructing the lineaments of just such an alternative aesthetic theory was precisely what Clement Greenberg endeavored to do in a series of seminars he conducted at Bennington College, Vermont, in the early ’70s. In one of these seminars, Greenberg reproached the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce (whose early-twentieth-century lectures on aesthetics he found second only to Kant) for not having followed through on his intuition that anything that can yield an aesthetic experience can also yield an *artistic* experience, and for having missed, therefore, that “all reality, all possibility is virtually art, not necessarily realized as art, but virtual as art.” Greenberg went on to say:

*It was Croce’s big mistake, and others’, to say that if art is bad, it is not art, and then to leave it undecided as to what bad art was, what order of experience it belonged to. That left a whole huge area of human experience unaccounted for; not bad art, non-art. And introspection, I think, shows that this isn’t so, that it is the very nature of art to contain infinite degrees of value, quality, and so forth.*⁴

“Introspection shows that this isn’t so”: If you reflect enough on your aesthetic experience of art, Greenberg argued, you’ll realize that you cannot draw a line beyond which bad art is so terribly bad that it ceases to be art at all. I must say that I agree. I know from experience that the aesthetic appreciation of art is a matter of intensity of feeling and urgency of thought on a continuous scale of nuances. Even though, in theory, there ought to be a boundary somewhere between art and non-art, in experience it is bound to dissolve. I beg your pardon: I just wrote “non-art” as shorthand for “what is not art.” In Greenberg’s account, “non-art” is not the same thing as “not-art,” yet it is not simply a trivial subcategory of art either, as Judd would have us believe. *Non-art is bad art mistaken for not-art.* That mistake is not an error of taste, and thus supposedly not a matter of aesthetic experience; philosophers would call it a category mistake (a fallacy where things that belong to one category are mistakenly placed in another)—and a strange one, because it seems to be voluntary. If I understand Greenberg correctly, non-art is what results from a refusal to judge aesthetically something that ought to have been the object of an aesthetic judgment, however severe. Works of art are such things. Indeed, Greenberg’s adamant conviction was that “when no esthetic value judgment, no verdict of taste, is there, then art isn’t there either, then esthetic experience of any kind isn’t there. It’s as simple as that.”⁵



Detail of caricature by Honoré Daumier published in *Le Charivari*, April 6, 1859. The caption reads:

“Ignoramuses . . . they have refused this!”

BUT SIMPLE IT CERTAINLY ISN'T. Where does the refusal to make an aesthetic judgment originate? In a willful decision of the viewer? In a conscious intention on the part of the artist? Croce's opinion that bad art is not art means that he upholds the first theory: There are works that are so bad they don't even deserve aesthetic attention; you won't even look at them. But are you not, then, making another category mistake, one between attention and judgment? And if you decide not to look—not to look attentively—is it not because one glance was enough? If introspection tells you, as it certainly told Greenberg and as it tells me, that aesthetic experience *is* judgment and that both are involuntary (that is, you can't help liking or disliking a given work), then you begin to question whether the refusal to judge aesthetically was a conscious, voluntary decision, even though turning your attention away was a deliberate one. “Cover that breast, which I'd rather not see,” the hypocritical Tartuffe exclaims in Molière's eponymous play.⁶ Honestly, wouldn't you admit that averting your gaze in order to avoid aesthetic judgment was the paradoxical outcome of an aesthetic experience you had but denied having had? Croce's mistake is more twisted and complicated than Greenberg thought: In practice, sometimes we *do* draw a line between art and non-art—pardon, between art and *not-art*, between art worthy of the name and art so bad or so disturbing (more about that later) that we judge it undeserving of the name. And we don't commit a category mistake if we draw that line aesthetically, while denying having had an aesthetic experience. It would be closer to the truth to say that we *invoke* the category mistake conflating bad art and not-art as if it were an alibi for our denial of aesthetic judgment in the first place. Greenberg would have to agree that in this instance, we unwittingly produce a case of non-art.

Now, what about the second theory? What if the refusal to pass aesthetic judgment originates not in the viewer's decision but in the artist's intention? That yields another brand of non-art: art that *banks* on Croce's mistake; art that *wants* to be dismissed as not-art and *seeks* confusion with the vast empirical world of what-is-not-art, yet in which Greenberg saw an infinity of virtual, potential art; art that traps viewers into denying the aesthetic experience they inevitably had; in short, *art as not-art*. Can that brand of non-art be *good art*? Is it automatically *bad art*? Should it be rejected as *not-art* on account of the artist's avowed intention? Or, on the contrary, hailed as *non-art* for the same reason? In Greenberg's mind, that brand of non-art is ipso facto *inferior art* because it pretends to shunt aesthetic judgment; it makes a theoretical point of making judgment of taste beside the point. Here Greenberg added: “And it is inferior art that hoped, in making judgments of taste beside the point, also to make its own qualitative inferiority beside the point.”⁷

Readers of *Artforum* won't be surprised to learn that Marcel Duchamp's readymades were, for Greenberg, the epitome of such inferior art, the prototype for all the “far-out” avant-gardism they authorized and against which he systematically railed. Although this is not true for all the artist's readymades, the urinal *Fountain* undeniably *wanted* to be dismissed as not-art, *sought* confusion with the world out there, and *banked* on Croce's category mistake. For that very reason, Duchamp cannot be accused of making that mistake. In his critique of Croce, Greenberg disputed that a line could be traced in the continuous scale of aesthetic experience. But this is no longer the issue. Since the artist drew it in advance of the viewer, the line is not a matter of the viewer's experience at all; it runs between two parties in an agonistic game. On either side are two groups who differ less in their appreciation than in their theories: Viewers upholding Croce's theory think that bad art, or the worst art, does not deserve its name. They exclude *Fountain* from the domain of art, not realizing that they fall into the artist's trap, and in fact endorse the production of an instance of *not-art as art*—albeit as art *unworthy* of the name, as *inferior art*. Viewers upholding Greenberg's theory go along with him in refusing to rule out *Fountain* but maintaining that, as one particular instance of inferior art, it demonstrates that to speak of art worthy or not worthy of the name is irrelevant, because “art is not an honorific status. The condition of being art does not necessarily confer honor or more than minimal value on anything or any event or any act or any moment.”⁸

Clever, but wrong. It is not up to the critic or the theorist of aesthetics to decide whether art has honorific status. Society bestows honors on certain human activities and not on others, and there is not one society on earth (so far) that does not salute art and artists with marks of honor. These can be anything from religious worship to hero glorification to media glamorization; the point is that Greenberg was wrong if he thought he could weasel out of a difficult theoretical conundrum by stripping art of its honorific status. Or did he think that ranks of aesthetic superiority or inferiority are somehow miraculously immune to contamination by what defines honorific status *socially*? We might remind ourselves that honorific status is never abstract and, in that sense, never purely honorific. It entails power, prestige, wealth, privilege, public veneration, career advancement, and other entitlements. The

social body that plays arbiter, that distributes honor, power, wealth, prestige, and privilege among artists, that advances the careers of some and blocks others from public veneration, is what we call the institution of art—in McEvilley’s term, the “system.”

The passage from one such system to another is the broader scope of my *Artforum* series as a whole, and the role that non-art played in this passage is the focus of this and last month’s essays.⁹ The art institution we left behind is the Beaux-Arts system, and the institution we have entered is what I call the Art-in-General system. Right now, the latter is moving swiftly away from the dealer–critic system that defined it since the end of the nineteenth century, into some private collector/celebrity artist/monopolistic gallery/prestigious auction house/Russian oligarch system that has disastrous, predictable and perhaps felicitous, unpredictable effects on contemporary art. (It’s too early to tell, and it depends on whether or not a new avant-garde emerges from our “contemporaneity” in the way the original avant-garde emerged from nineteenth-century academicism.) We may have left the dealer/critic system behind *economically*, but we still live in the Art-in-General system, and probably for a long time to come, because what defines the latter *aesthetically* is that in it anything can be art. In Greenberg’s words: “We live in an ocean of art or of the possibility of art. An infinity already there.”¹⁰

I see Duchamp as the messenger who heralded the passage from the Beaux-Arts to the Art-in-General system.¹¹ And I take *Fountain* to encapsulate the news of that passage, broadcast in 1917 (with Alfred Stieglitz’s photo of the work in the journal *The Blind Man*, which tells of the urinal’s disappearance from the First Annual Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists) but not reaching its audience until the mid-’60s, when a myriad of artists suddenly acknowledged receipt of it. Although Greenberg was a little slower on the uptake than many of those artists, he didn’t make the mistake of shooting the messenger when he spoke of “an infinity already there.” It is remarkable that, for all his hatred of Duchamp and of all the bad art Duchamp’s success had spawned, Greenberg never rejected the readymades as not-art. He acknowledged them as a demonstration worth making and never made before: that everything is potential art—or, as he put it, “virtually art.”¹² Whether such a thing can be demonstrated is doubtful, but it doesn’t affect what is important in Greenberg’s insight: the fact that Duchamp didn’t change the art institution—as if any artist could single-handedly achieve a change of that magnitude. Duchamp certainly conceived the idea of readymades, and he chose them one by one; he produced *Fountain* in precise circumstances; he most likely knew that sooner or later someone would coin the expression “non-art” to account for his gesture and similar ones by other artists; but he did not *invent* non-art. Neither did other Dada artists or Dada as a movement. As I argued in last month’s essay, the invention of non-art is some fifty years older than Dada and cannot be attributed to any artist at all. It is an involuntary side effect of the binary structure of aesthetic judgment in the French Beaux-Arts system’s main state apparatus, the nineteenth-century Salon.

WITH GREENBERG’S INSIGHT about Croce’s mistake in mind, let us now revisit the five stages of the birth of non-art I outlined in my previous essay. First stage: the Salon des Refusés. I have argued that the jurors’ rejection of Édouard Manet’s *Le Bain* (The Bath, now titled *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* [Luncheon on the Grass]), 1863, at the Salon that same year rested on the denial of their intensely emotional aesthetic response to the painting: “The jurors *knew* that with *Le Bain* Manet had radically redefined the tableau; they just couldn’t stand it.”¹³ I admit this was speculative. But in the absence of direct historical testimony, we are bound to speculate. So I drew on my experience and on that of Leo Steinberg, as recounted in his essay “Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public” (1962), in order to construct a plausible phenomenology of the jury’s verdict.¹⁴ Let me now build on that. First, allow me to dispel all allegations that the painting was a prank intended to mock tradition and to shock the bourgeois. This may very well have been an unintended effect of the painting, of which Manet was aware and which he accepted, but *anti-art* was definitely not on his mind. Then, let me emphasize the seriousness and ambition of the artist’s endeavor with *Le Bain*, by resting my appraisal of his intentions on Michael Fried’s now-classic analysis of the painting: Fried reads the problematic unity of the canvas as relying on an unprecedented attempt to achieve the synthesis of all the genres of painting.¹⁵ And let me thus speculate the following: Manet presented the jurors with what he conceived as a *tableau*, which quasi-didactically embodied that attempt at a synthesis. The jurors intuitively sensed Manet’s ambition because their notion of the tableau—the one prevalent in the criticism of the 1860s—involved a coalescence of qualities independent of genre. But they could not, or would not, accept the consequence Manet drew from that independence, namely, that “tableau” henceforth stood for *painting at large* rather than for portrait, landscape, or history painting.¹⁶ In their eyes, none of the qualities that would award the painting the status of a tableau—and *pace* Greenberg, that *was* an honorific status—were present. As far as they were concerned, Manet had thrown a commotion on the canvas: a still life in the lower-left corner, a superb *morceau de peinture*, but how

lackadaisically strewn on the model's petticoat!; a landscape in the background painted so hastily it looked like a theater backdrop; and an incomprehensible genre scene in the middle, in which the jury may or may not have recognized an updated, thirdhand quotation of Raphael, via Marcantonio and Charles Blanc, not counting the indecent nude that looks us in the eyes and tosses Ingres's slick odalisque "into one pot with Rembrandt and Giotto."¹⁷ The jurors saw the impure mixture of the genres but not their new synthesis. As a result, *Le Bain* appeared to them as a total *negation* or *betrayal* of the conventions of the tableau in any genre, and this was enough to motivate their rejection of the painting.

Negation and betrayal were, in the jurors' minds, perpetrated by the artist. From our point of view, however, it is clear that the jurors, not the artist, enunciated the negation. They are the ones who judged that *Le Bain* was *not* a tableau good enough to be shown. With that switch in agency, the meaning of *betrayal* changes: It meant *treason* for the jurors, who accused Manet of it; it means *involuntary admission* for us, who attribute it to the jurors. Did the jurors commit Croce's mistake? Did they wrongly take bad art for not-art? Not exactly; we are dealing here with a more sophisticated variant of Croce's mistake. First, *Le Bain* was not so much bad art in the jurors' eyes as disquieting art, upsetting art, incomprehensible and perhaps revolting art; all epithets that made them accuse Manet of betrayal. Second, the jurors did not rule that *Le Bain* was not art, only that it had to be banned from public view. (If the painting ended up being shown, it was only thanks to the emperor, Napoleon III, who authorized the Salon des Refusés.) But to ears attuned to the exasperated tone of their possible debate, their verdict sounds like an involuntary avowal of the painting's perceived but not acknowledged qualities. It conveys a negation of a particular kind, a denial in the quasi-Freudian sense, a "no" that betrays itself as a "yes." Third, and this is crucial: When the jurors denied *Le Bain* the aesthetic qualities that would have made it a tableau in their eyes, did they also deny having had an aesthetic experience? I speculate that they did. A negative aesthetic experience rarely translates as the claim of *not having had an aesthetic experience at all*, but this seems to have been the case here, as close attention to the second stage of the birth of non-art may confirm.

THAT STAGE WAS REACHED when Stéphane Mallarmé penned "*Le Jury de peinture pour 1874 et M. Manet*," in reaction to the rejection of Manet's *Bal masqué à l'Opéra* (Masked Ball at the Opera) and *Les Hirondelles* (The Swallows), both 1873, by the jury of the 1874 Salon. The excerpt I quoted in last month's essay is worth further scrutiny:

*Entrusted with the nebulous vote of the painters with the responsibility of choosing, from among the framed pictures offered, those that are truly tableaux in order to show them to us, the jury has nothing else to say but: this is a tableau, or that is not a tableau.*¹⁸

I have previously pointed out how curious it seemed that Mallarmé was exhorting the jury to do something it already did. This is a symptom. The context leaves no doubt that the poet was not simply describing the jury's task; he was enjoining the jury to utter a judgment that he thought they should have pronounced but didn't. He was irritated that the jurors let their personal taste override what should have been a more neutral, open, "objective" appraisal. Yet Mallarmé must have known that such an appraisal was *aesthetic*, even if it shunned taste: He didn't invite the jury to separate tableaux from non-tableaux the way you and I would separate chairs from objects that are not chairs. And how did he understand "tableau"? He may not have been fully aware of the formal expectations that the critics of the 1860s saw converging in the notion of the tableau, particularly since, by the Salons of the 1870s, that term had lost some of its stringency. He may have used the word *tableau* in a sense closer to its everyday usage, or—more likely—as imbued with "the very neutral feeling of the artistic worth discernible in each thing in which it dwells,"¹⁹ which he admonished the jury to recognize. Whatever the case, there is no doubt that "this is a tableau" conveys an aesthetic judgment, albeit a liminal one; it admits a given "framed picture" into the domain of "those that are truly tableaux," and thereby establishes its admissibility into the higher domain of art. In short, "this is a tableau" means "this *can* be art"—not "this *is* art." To be a tableau in Mallarmé's sense is not in itself the guarantor of art status; it warrants only the legitimacy of the *claim* to art status. I believe that Mallarmé thought that the task of the jury was to grant or refuse that legitimacy, and that the task of the public was to grant or refuse, in various proportions, the trademark of aesthetic excellence and originality that nineteenth-century viewers identified with art status proper. The impression we have that Mallarmé exhorted the jury to do something it already did may be accounted for by a deeper intuition on the poet's part regarding the specifics of the division of labor between jury and public. If the jury's verdict "this is truly a tableau" means *this can be art*, then the public's appreciation ("this is a good tableau") means *this is truly art*—art worthy of the name.

How do I know this? How is all this more than gratuitous speculation? Decoding Mallarmé's mannerist prose requires reading between the lines. The answer may come from focusing on his implicit treatment of the alternative, negative judgment. Only if the verdict "this is not a tableau" means *this cannot claim any sort of aesthetic excellence* should the jury be allowed to hide a picture from the public. For the public "is the master at this point, and can demand to see *everything that there is*."²⁰ Should the jury sense in a picture even the faintest whiff of the tableau, they must show it: "*Défense d'en cacher un*."²¹ Therefore, "this is not a tableau" *must* entail the illegitimacy of the picture's claim to art status; it *must* mean *this cannot be art* and not just *this is not art*. Only by way of a logical ricochet am I able to infer the positive from the negative: that "this is a tableau" means *this can be art* and not *this is art*. To cite Reinhardt again: "You can only make absolute statements negatively." Positive statements are relative—in other words, comparative.

Now, the interesting thing is that because of the lack of a perceptible difference between denial and ordinary logical negation (both use the symbol *no*), we can reach the same conclusion without Mallarmé's help. It is a trivial consequence of the division of the arts in the Beaux-Arts system that something that is not a painting, and is obviously not a sculpture, a poem, or a piece of music either—a chair, for example—cannot find a place among the fine arts, and therefore cannot be art. No value judgment is involved: To say that a chair is not a work of art is no insult to the chair. Here, I believe, lies the key to the question of whether the jurors made Croce's category mistake: They didn't commit it; they *invoked* it, whether consciously or not. A chair is not a work of art for the reason brought up by Greenberg: It doesn't call for an aesthetic judgment. The framed pictures Mallarmé asked the jury to dispatch to the categories of tableau or non-tableau, on the other hand, *of course* called for the jury's aesthetic judgment. But the jurors had an alibi for their denial if, under the pretext that Manet did not present them with a full-fledged tableau, they could pretend to remove *Les Hirondelles* from the category of the tableau, the way you and I sort chairs from non-chairs.

I'm not sure how much of this Mallarmé consciously theorized. I'd say very little. Whatever the case, his admonition to the jury symptomatically sheds light on the jury's reach for an alibi: In denying *Les Hirondelles* the quality of a tableau, the jurors translated their negative, annoyed, disturbed, but definitely *aesthetic* response into the disingenuous after-the-fact claim of not having had an aesthetic experience at all. The ricochet in Mallarmé's rescue of the painting is an even more interesting symptom: In reversing the jurors' verdict and thus granting legitimate art-status candidacy to what remained a non-tableau *in their eyes*, Mallarmé transgressed the boundaries of the Beaux-Arts system. In retrospect, the same can even be said of Napoleon III, when he authorized the Salon des Refusés. I mentioned earlier that if I understood Greenberg correctly, non-art resulted from a refusal to make an aesthetic judgment, however severe, about something that ought to be judged aesthetically. We are now a step beyond Greenberg. Non-art is a strange ontological category: the category of things that claim candidacy to art status and yet are denied the aesthetic appreciation such things require because, *in the Beaux-Arts system*, they cannot possibly be art.

IS THERE AN ART INSTITUTION, different from the Beaux-Arts system, where such things can be art? We know the answer: In the Art-in-General system in which we live, everything is a legitimate candidate for the status of art. And we are back to the question I asked in the first essay in this series: Since when? Since when do we live in the Art-in-General system? When did we exit the Beaux-Arts system? Except in cases of revolution, history doesn't move overnight from one institution to another, especially not from one with as massive a presence as the French Beaux-Arts system to one as loosely anarchic as the Art-in-General system. Yet the change could not have occurred gradually: The Beaux-Arts system morphing seamlessly into the Art-in-General system is as inconceivable as a monarchy smoothly becoming a republic. A conceptual revolution occurred, radical and absolute, and it is not the (r)evolution the history of modern art usually narrates. Cézanne's late paintings morphing into Georges Braque's early Cubism, morphing into Pablo Picasso's *papiers collés* and cardboard constructions, morphing into Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* and Duchamp's readymades, is a familiar story; in no way does it account for the transition from the Beaux-Arts to the Art-in-General system, which seems to me much better explained historically if we map it onto the five stages of the invention of non-art. In the long run, such mapping may ask art historians to theorize our concept of history in new, largely untried ways. For the time being, we might put our efforts on trial by turning to the third stage in the birth of non-art, the creation in 1884 of the Société des Artistes Indépendants.

I insisted in last month's essay that the Société's motto, "*Ni jury ni récompense*" (no jury, no prizes), amounted to the a priori admission that anything a member would present counted as potential art. Such an admission preempted

any judgment stating “this *cannot* be art,” since all entries had a legitimate claim to art status as a matter of principle. The Salon des Indépendants was the first venue in which, to return to Greenberg’s terms, “all reality, all possibility [was] virtually art, not necessarily realized as art, but virtual as art.”²² I see the Indépendants as the first historical incarnation of the Art-in-General system—a very local one, certainly, hardly pioneering an aesthetic upheaval and totally blind to the radical shift it precipitated. The Société could not possibly foresee that the betrayal of its no-jury rule automatically amounted not only to the denial of the rejected work’s virtual art status but also to the refusal to acknowledge the transition from the Beaux-Arts to the Art-in-General system, which the Société had willy-nilly accomplished. I would bet that no one among the founders of the Indépendants realized that to refuse a member’s entry (on any grounds) did not mean *this is not art*, but rather *this cannot be art*, in total contradiction of the no-jury rule. And no one predicted that someday the Indépendants might have to make an exception to that rule.

It was bound to happen, though, and when it did, the fourth stage in the birth of non-art was reached. We recall that the hanging committee of the Cubist room of the 1912 Salon des Indépendants made an exception to the no-jury rule, of which the young Duchamp was the unsuspecting victim. His *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)*, the committee claimed, was not a bona fide Cubist painting. Bruised and humiliated, Duchamp was forced to remove the painting from the show. What variant of Croce’s category mistake, if any, did the committee members commit or invoke? I don’t believe that Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, the most dogmatic among them, refused to see that the *Nude* was art, even less that it *could* be art. On the other hand, I wager that they had a reaction as emotional as that of the jurors of the 1863 and the 1874 Salons who saw Manet’s entries. There is a huge difference, though. The Indépendants had exited the Beaux-Arts system, and Gleizes and Metzinger didn’t realize that. Whether or not they denied that their negative aesthetic experience was an aesthetic experience at all, denial was now a built-in consequence of the institution’s rules: Denying the right to the status of art to something that had that right as a matter of principle amounted to an automatic, a priori refusal to judge that thing aesthetically. Neither the psychology nor the phenomenology of aesthetic experience mattered anymore.

A line now appears that separates two parties in an agonistic game. Gleizes and Metzinger thought that the *Nude* didn’t deserve the name of Cubist painting. Duchamp seemed to think that “Cubist painting” was not necessarily an honorific status, but he was deeply hurt all the same. The chance for revenge came his way when the vagaries of the war made him cross paths with Gleizes once again. This happened in New York, where both men had landed after fleeing Europe. Both were consulted about the creation of a new artists’ society in opposition to the conservative Academy of Design. One of them (or both) advised the Ashcan School alumni who formed the core of the protesters to model the statutes of their society after those of the French Indépendants: No jury, no prizes. The rest is history. It is also the last and fifth stage in the birth of non-art, now clearly identified with the last and fifth stage of the advent of the Art-in-General system. A few days before the opening of its first salon, held in April 1917, the board of directors of the newly incorporated Society of Independent Artists received an entry from a certain Richard Mutt titled *Fountain*, which was actually a urinal turned on its side, dated, and signed the way works of art are supposed to be. Duchamp alias Mutt had chosen the object so as to make sure that it would be rejected. He had set a trap.

An exhibition of art is a context of expected *aesthetic expectations*. The Society’s directors didn’t know exactly what to expect. They were ready for amateur art, children’s drawings, decorative objects of all kinds, even (why not?) fountains—but of course not the one Richard Mutt had in store for them. Mutt, who had the right to exhibit two works in exchange for his six-dollar membership dues, expected that the directors wouldn’t stretch the range of their expectations beyond the boundaries of the Beaux-Arts system; yet he demanded that they do just that, that they judge a urinal aesthetically, as a legitimate candidate for the name of art. They did, because their no-jury rule forced them to do so. At an emergency meeting to decide the fate of the litigious object, one of the directors on the board apparently exclaimed: “You mean to say, if a man sent in horse manure glued to a canvas that we would have to accept it!”²³ To expect manure on a canvas was bad enough, but it could still be conceived within the Beaux-Arts system; to stretch one’s range of expectations to manure, period, was really beyond the pale for that director.²⁴ This betrays that he (and his colleagues) were aware of the peculiar nature of Richard Mutt’s trap: By asking them to pronounce aesthetically on *Fountain*’s candidacy to art status, Mutt had asked them whether they were ready to acknowledge the collapse of the Beaux-Arts system and the advent of the Art-in-General system.

They were not. After a heated discussion, they whisked the urinal away and issued a press release stating, “The *Fountain* may be a very useful object in its place, but its place is not an art exhibition and it is, by no definition, a work of art.”²⁵ “By no definition” entailed that the useful object in question *could not* be art. The board of directors

had clearly fallen into Mutt's trap and reacted exactly as Duchamp had expected them to react: They refused to acknowledge the consequence of their own no-jury rule. They could not fathom that they were, in spite of themselves, the pioneers of the new Art-in-General system.

Duchamp could have left it at that and secretly savored his little revenge on Gleizes and Metzinger. But his calling was to be the messenger. Stieglitz's photo in *The Blind Man* made sure that the Independents' censorship of *Fountain* landed on the record, and left it to posterity to draw the consequences. The critics and artists of the '60s complied. But even *they* blamed or hailed the messenger. Many lent Duchamp the paternity of non-art, not realizing that it was actually the Independents who had produced an instance of *not-art as art*, or of *art as not-art*—the very definition of that brand of non-art that results from an artist banking on Croce's category mistake and on an audience falling in his trap.

The limbo of non-art now contains one object that *everybody agrees* doesn't belong in the Beaux-Arts system. This agreement is, I believe, Duchamp's most remarkable achievement with *Fountain*. The dividing line is by the same token, to use his words, "the sign of the accordance."²⁶ There are those who cling to the Beaux-Arts system and reject *Fountain*, and there are those who celebrate *Fountain* and reject the Beaux-Arts system. Both groups agree that *Fountain* belongs elsewhere, whether it is in the category of inferior art so bad that it doesn't deserve its name or in the category of the best avant-garde art that leaves Picasso behind "as the last of the humanists."²⁷ Am I asked to take a stand? How could I possibly cling to the Beaux-Arts system, knowing that it died in the 1880s? And why would I reject it, knowing the same? It would be like rejecting horse carriages because we now have automobiles. I don't particularly *like* Duchamp's urinal. Give me any Matisse or Picasso or Mondrian or Malevich to live with—they're better company. But I tip my hat to the messenger. *Fountain* is a work of genius, no doubt; the bottle rack (*Sèche-bouteilles*, 1914), the snow shovel (*In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1915), the comb (*Peigne*, 1916), and perhaps the coatrack (*Trébuchet*, 1917) come close. I would be hard-pressed to call them inferior art, but I cannot call them great art either: The physical objects do not sustain renewed encounter on a sufficiently deep, unexpected, and inexplicable plane of experience. And, as everybody knows, the *idea* of the readymade is more art theory than art (which is why, being the theorist I am, I fell for it—call me the perfect sucker).

But *Fountain* is more than an idea, and it's not illustrated theory. Embodied theory, perhaps. The more I think about it, the more I tend to see *Fountain* as the most remarkable thought experiment about art ever contrived, as dry and ethereal and mysteriously political as those quattrocento *cittè ideale* once attributed to Piero della Francesca. An ideal city is a transcendental place of agreement in disagreement: an agora empty of flesh-and-blood people, a haven in the public sphere based on the principal legitimacy of dissent. *Fountain* prompts agreement about its belonging to the Art-in-General system, something that cannot be positively ascertained. Indeed, there is no proof that that system even exists. There is no proof that everything can be art. There are only dissenting judgments. To paraphrase Mallarmé, the judge of art has only to say: "This is art," or "this is not art." And as Reinhardt knew, only the latter is an absolute statement.

Next month: "Part VI: *This Is Art—Anatomy of a Sentence*"

[Thierry de Duve](#) is currently teaching at the School of Visual Arts in New York. In fall 2013, he was Kirk Varnedoe visiting professor at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.

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NOTES

(Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in French are the author's translation.)

1. Phyllisann Kallick, "An Interview with Ad Reinhardt," *Studio International* 174 (December 1967): 272.

2. Donald Judd, "Statement," in *Donald Judd: The Complete Writings 1959–1975* (Halifax, Canada: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2005), 190. Originally published in Kynaston McShine, ed., *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors*, exh. cat. (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1966).
3. Thomas McEvelley, "Art in the Dark," *Artforum*, Summer 1983, 63.
4. Clement Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 158.
5. *Ibid.*, 62.
6. "Couvrez ce sein que je ne saurais voir!" Molière, *Tartuffe*, 3.2.860–62.
7. Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, 159.
8. *Ibid.*, 158.
9. See my "The Invention of Non-Art: A History," *Artforum*, February 2014, 192–99, 238.
10. Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, 158.
11. This, after having seen him as the messenger of "anything goes" (*Artforum*, October 2013), of "everyone is an artist" (*Artforum*, November 2013), of the collapse of the Beaux-Arts system (*Artforum*, January 2014), and of the advent of non-art (*Artforum*, February 2014).
12. Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, 158.
13. "The Invention of Non-Art: A History," 198.
14. Leo Steinberg, "Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Originally published in *Harper's Magazine*, March 1962.
15. "In sum I see Manet's project in the *Déjeuner* as involving a deliberate attempt to bring together and in effect to fuse in a single large-scale work as many of the major genres of painting as he could encompass." Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism: or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 174.
16. Fried, who sees Manet's attempt at a "totalization" of the major genres of painting as running parallel to, or indeed as converging with, the artist's striving for a "universal" painting transcending the national schools, speaks of both endeavors as the pursuit of "painting altogether" (*Manet's Modernism*, 175, 126, 404). I prefer to speak of "painting at large" in order to avoid confusion with "art altogether," an expression I shall introduce and explain in the next *Artforum* essay in the present series.
17. I quote Steinberg here, who ends his account of the depressing experience he had when visiting Jasper Johns's first New York solo show, in 1958, thusly: "For what really depressed me was what I felt these works were able to do to all other art. The pictures of de Kooning and Kline, it seemed to me, were suddenly tossed into one pot with Rembrandt and Giotto." Steinberg, "Contemporary Art," 12.
18. Stéphane Mallarmé, "Le Jury de peinture pour 1874 et M. Manet," in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1945), 699. I quote from George Heard Hamilton's translation (*Manet and His Critics*, 184), with the French "tableau" restored for Hamilton's "painting."

19. “*Un sentiment très neutre de la valeur artistique discernable dans toute chose où elle se trouve.*” Mallarmé, “*Le Jury de peinture pour 1874 et M. Manet,*” 699.
20. “*Il [le public] est le maître à ce point, et peut exiger de voir tout ce qu’il y a.*” Ibid.
21. “It is forbidden to hide one [tableau].” Ibid.
22. Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*, 158.
23. William Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp: Fountain* (Houston: The Menil Collection, 1989), 25.
24. The director in question is either George Bellows or Rockwell Kent. Beatrice Wood has given two versions of the story, with either of them engaged in a heated discussion over *Fountain* with Walter Arensberg. See Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp: Fountain*, 25–26, note 24.
25. Quoted in Francis Naumann, “The Big Show, The First Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, Part I,” *Artforum*, February 1979, 38.
26. The expression “the sign of the accordance” appears in two notes contained in Marcel Duchamp’s *Green Box*. See Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 28.
27. John Canaday, “Leonardo Duchamp,” *New York Times*, January 17, 1965.