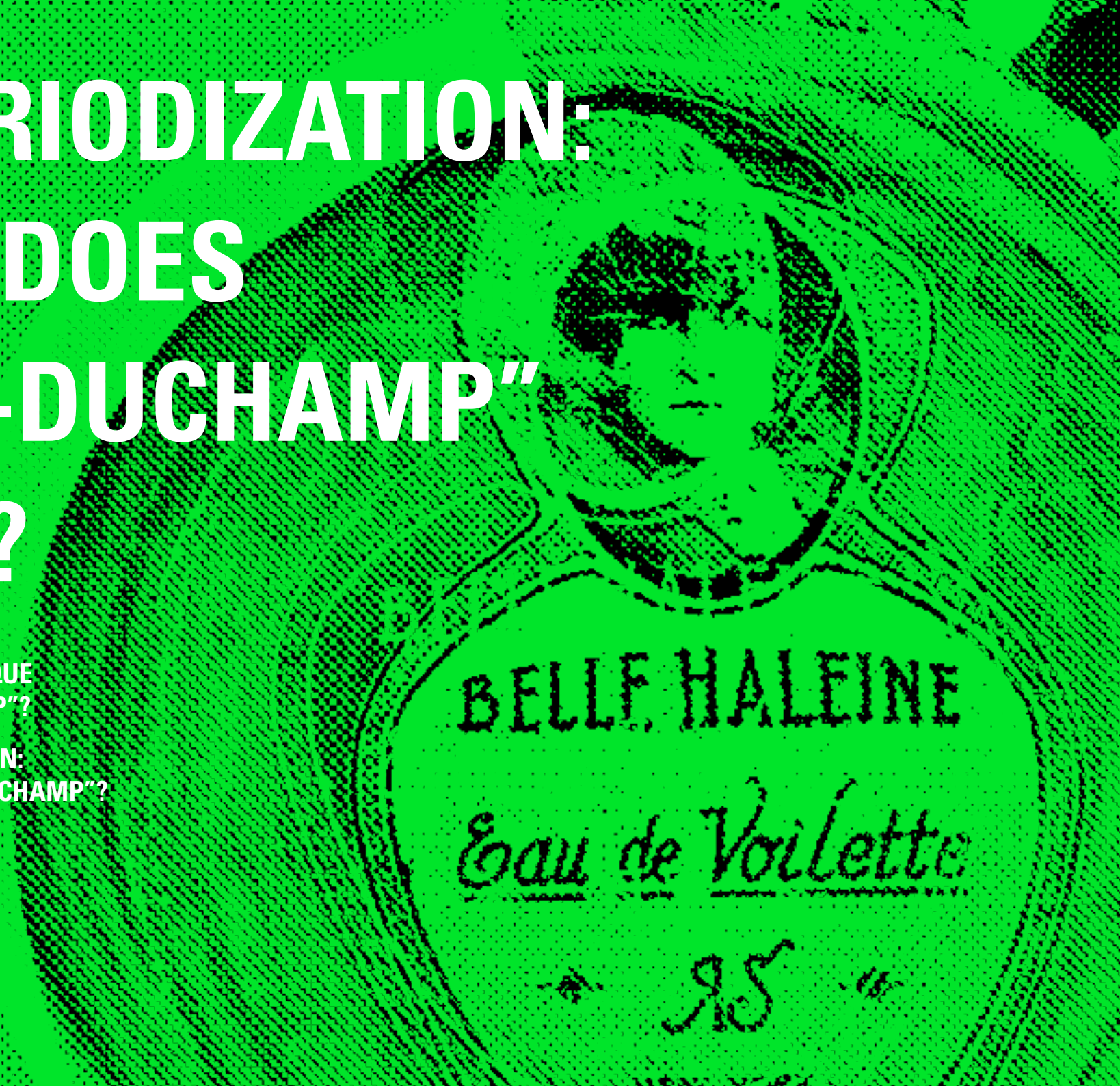


ON PERIODIZATION: WHAT DOES “POST-DUCHAMP” MEAN?

SOBRE PERIODIZAÇÃO: O QUE
SIGNIFICA “PÓS-DUCHAMP”?

A CERCA DE PERIODIZACIÓN:
¿QUÉ SIGNIFICA “POST-DUCHAMP”?

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ABSTRACT

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When we speak of a post-Duchamp art world, we raise a particularly vexing periodization problem. Marcel Duchamp's readymades, and the famous/infamous urinal titled *Fountain* in particular, have signaled that a sea change has occurred in the art world, which was not a change in styles but rather in aesthetic regimes, not a change in art movements but rather in art institutions, a change which, *mutatis mutandis*, is as radical as the passage from monarchy to republic, yet a change which art history books have not recorded yet, as such. Without addressing it in full, my paper recalls the steps that made me aware of this periodization problem.

KEYWORDS Duchamp; Post-Duchamp; Periodization; Contemporaneity; Art Institution

RESUMO

Quando se fala em um mundo pós-Duchamp, cria-se um problema de periodização particularmente incômodo. Os *ready-mades* de Duchamp e, em específico, o ilustre e infame urinol intitulado *A fonte*, sinalizavam que uma alteração profunda havia ocorrido no mundo da arte, uma alteração que não dizia respeito a estilos, mas a regimes estéticos, uma mudança não dos movimentos, mas sim das instituições da arte, tão radical, *mutatis mutandis*, quanto a passagem da monarquia para a república e que, mesmo assim, os livros de história da arte ainda não registraram enquanto tal. Sem endereçá-la em sua totalidade, meu artigo reconstrói os passos que me tornaram ciente desse problema de periodização.


PALAVRAS-CHAVE Duchamp; Pós-Duchamp; Periodização; Contemporaneidade; Instituição de arte

RESUMEN

Hablar en un mundo post-Duchamp es crear un problema de periodización particularmente incómodo. Los *ready-mades* de Duchamp, y en especial el urinario llamado *La fuente*, señalaban que un cambio profundo en el mundo del arte había ocurrido, un cambio no de estilos, sino de regimens estéticos, no de movimientos, sino de instituciones del arte, tan radical, *mutatis mutandis*, cuanto el pasaje de la monarquía para la república y que mismo así los libros de historia del arte aún no registraran en cuanto tal. Sin tratar de ella en su totalidad, mi artículo reconstruye los pasos que me llamaron atención hasta ese problema de periodización.

PALABRAS-CLAVE Duchamp; Post-Duchamp; Periodización; Contemporaneidad; Institución de arte





Pensare la storia e certamente periodizzarla.
(Benedetto Croce)

Periodization is a vexed issue in every branch of history, but its problems are particularly ironical in the field of art history. I just wrote “art history”, and that’s a first problem, for there is no such thing. Rather than the *history of art*, what we have is *histories of the arts*, in which periodization moves at various paces: as is well known, the baroque period is not the same in painting, music, or architecture. And that’s a second problem: should recourse to an external historical referent, such as political or economic history, attempt to unify the tempos of development in the individual arts? Or should their autonomy be respected and emphasized? If the former, what justifies the chosen historical referent’s privilege? (Certainly, the old infrastructure/superstructure dialectic doesn’t do.) If the latter, how to avoid the tautological usage of style as a periodizing tool – a problem epitomized by Wölfflin’s extraction of

the criteria for “baroque” (painterly, recessive, open, etc.) from the art of the period conventionally called baroque in the first place? (The result, as we know, was the disappearance of mannerism in a black hole of history.) Moreover, why should the master-concept of *style*, or the adjunct-concept of *art movement*, provide the exclusive bias through which changes in art are accounted for and explained? This bias is called historicism, and it is not easy to shake off because time doesn’t spontaneously cut itself in slices: periodization, it seems, cannot avoid being arbitrary and problematic.

For historians of modern art, periodization is especially vexing since the word “modern” implies a conventionally agreed-upon slicing of time that is anything but unanimous. To be critically aware of that conventionality is to consider that periodization itself is at stake in the choices we make of what constitutes modern art. The advent of so-called postmodernism has made that problem every modern art historian’s ordeal. No historian of modern/postmodern art is henceforth protected from the duty of stating when modern art started, and ended. This has led to some pleasant paradoxes: forty years ago, Jean-François Lyotard settled his account for the postmodern question in art with this felicitous turn of phrase: “A work of art can become

modern only if it is first postmodern” (LYOTARD [1982], 1986, p. 365, translation mine). Anyone familiar with the avant-gardes immediately grasps the force of the paradox. For a work of art to be acknowledged as modern, it must first have broken new ground, must have been at odds with the taste and conventions of its time: Picasso was postmodern in 1907, he became modern around 1930; today, he is classical. With that inescapable paradox, Lyotard meant to mock the double bind that the periodizers of forty years ago who launched the word “postmodern” created for themselves: if modern, then postmodern; if postmodern, then modern. It is no wonder, then, that in the last twenty years the word “postmodernism” was quietly shelved in favor of “contemporaneity” or “the contemporary”, as if this substitution eliminated the problem of periodization altogether¹.

Periodization by way of proper names (the Napoleonic wars, pre-Columbian art, the Reagan-Thatcher years, things like that) is less tricky than wiggling out of the “postmodernism” double bind or betting on the shelf life of “contemporaneity”. When it comes to the modern/postmodern/contemporary conundrum, there is no name that is proffered more often than that of Marcel Duchamp.

I don't count the number of times I have read – and written – that we live in the post-Duchamp era or that we have moved to a post-Duchamp art world. With this paper, I want to revisit the particular and very special problem of periodization I encountered in the course of my four decade-long critical dialogue with the work and the legacy of Marcel Duchamp. I shall recall how I theorized my initial awareness that Duchamp's work confronted us with a true and particularly tough periodization problem and how I progressively changed the terms of that theorization. And I want to reflect on the surprising and, in retrospect, surprisingly straightforward outcome of that inquiry.

Readers familiar with my work since *Pictorial Nominalism* know that I am obsessed with reading Duchamp's oeuvre, and the readymades in particular, for the signs or symptoms they contain of a *passage* – a passage that is both a paradigm shift for aesthetic theory and a historical transition (DE DUVE, 1991). I'm therefore not immune to the difficulty Wölfflin faced, of promoting particular works of art to the rank of periodizing tool justified in return by the paradigm shift they supposedly initiated. The difference – and the additional difficulty – is that the readymades did not initiate a *stylistic* paradigm shift: their break from their

immediate predecessors – cubist collages and assemblages – is much more radical than a change in style: it affects the very definition of what constitutes a work of art. There have been attempts to factor in the readymades’ impact on the definition of art as soon as the 1930s – witness André Breton’s idealist account of readymades as objects elevated to art status by the artist’s choice² – but awareness of the readymades’ deadpan, materialist subversion of such idealist recuperations really came to the fore only with the advent of conceptual art. And with conceptual art came the imperative to periodize. Joseph Kosuth, for example, went so far as to profess: “The function of art, as a question, was first raised by Marcel Duchamp. In fact it is Marcel Duchamp whom we can credit with giving art its own identity” (KOSUTH [1969], 1991, p. 18).

This is not the place for a critique of Kosuth’s bold contention. We can agree with him that the expression “post-Duchamp” compels us to periodize the history of the visual arts in a way a chronological sequence of styles – as historicism would have it – cannot. Duchamp was born in 1887 and died in 1968. Whether the “post-Duchamp” question was raised sometime during his life or only after his death is debatable, but surely it could not have been raised before his birth. We can also agree with

Kosuth that it was the readymades and not the *Large Glass* or any of his paintings that prompted the post-Duchamp question. In *Pictorial Nominalism*, I theorized the implied periodization as the passage from the specific to the generic. Taking my cue from Duchamp's very personal transition from painting, specifically, to readymades, I surmised that this transition had universal significance, which I began to investigate seriously (both historically and philosophically) in *Kant after Duchamp* (DE DUVE, 1996). Readymades were the first instance of works of art that claim art status without belonging to any of the particular arts, the first instance of what I called *art in general*.

The problem with art in general, I slowly realized, is that works don't stay very long in that category: as soon as they are accepted as art, they generate new names capable of accommodating them. The readymades became art when they prompted the appellation "readymades," and the same can be said not only for installation or performance art but also for pop and op art, for kinetic art, body art, or indeed, conceptual art, all phenomena dating from the 1960s. I remember pitting the proliferation of new art names against the proliferation of artistic "isms" in an earlier phase of modernism, stressing that "isms" operated across media whereas the various epithets attached to the generic "art" were attempts at re-specifying

“art” without reviving traditional medium-specificity³. This proliferation of new art names was a symptom of the passage I was trying to theorize. Another symptom – but it’s really the flipside of the same coin – has been pinpointed by Rosalind Krauss when she showed that the alternative to coining new names was to make existing categories “almost infinitely malleable”:

Categories like sculpture and painting have been kneaded and stretched and twisted in an extraordinary demonstration of elasticity, a display of the way a cultural term can be extended to include just about anything. (KRAUSS, 1985, p. 277)

But, Krauss insists, although such expansion of the semantic area of terms like sculpture and painting “is overtly performed in the name of vanguard aesthetics – the ideology of the new – its covert message is that of historicism” (Ibidem). Historicism, she adds, “works on the new and different to diminish newness and mitigate difference. It makes a place for change in our experience by evoking the model of evolution, so that the man who now is can be accepted as different from the child he once was” (Ibidem). Applied to style, the “ages of life” metaphor is the prototypical “model of evolution” and historicism’s favorite

trope. But try to apply it to the readymades and their apparent consequences! Historicism allows only the kind of periodization by way of style or art movement that the recognition of a post-Duchamp era radically displaces. I wonder if, in speaking of the post-Duchamp periodization in terms of the passage from the specific (painting) to the generic (art in general), I really escaped the trap of historicism. In truth, I was keen on *saving* a certain kind of historicism – meaning continuity, which is not the same thing as evolution – because inscribing the readymades in the history of art without an eye on continuity would have precipitated me into another trap, avant-gardism, the ideology of the *tabula rasa*. Hence my insistence on seeking missing links between the specific and the generic (such as the tube of paint and the blank canvas⁴), both in Duchamp’s work and in the work of the artists of the ’60s who, as I would later say, *acknowledged receipt* of the news his readymades (or rather, one of them) had brought us. But let’s not put the carriage before the horses. At the time of *Kant after Duchamp*, the problem of periodizing the post-Duchamp condition presented itself as the injunction to periodize the passage from the specific to the generic without falling into the traps of either historicism or avant-gardism.

Things became clearer in my mind when, in *Aesthetics at Large*, I pushed the fragile category of *art in general* to the side (where it would remain the name for things that are momentarily not identifiable within the existing categories), in favor of two new variants: *art-in-general* and *Art-in-General*:

The post-Duchamp condition [...] has allowed for new art practices to emerge, which can avail themselves of anything whatever—any material, any subject matter, any technique. This availability characterizes the apparently infinitely liberal aesthetic regime of *art-in-general* (hyphenated) under which all art practices, including conventional ones (and not just the unclassifiable ones I called *art in general*, not hyphenated), are appraised. Let the term *Art-in-General* (hyphenated and capitalized) refer to the situation underlying art-in-general, namely, the a priori possibility that anything can be art. Art-in-General is [...] a historically datable concept that names the condition in which we consciously find ourselves following the reception of Duchamp's readymades by the art of the '60s and their subsequent legitimation by art history and art museums. [...] Art-in-General excludes none of the established art forms while also potentially including every possible *thing* that has material existence. Indeed, the content I give to this expression is that it is now technically possible, aesthetically permitted, and institutionally legitimate to make art from anything and everything. Art-in-General is the name for the new deal or the new condition that has become established in the post-Duchamp era. It replaces the old generic term *Fine Arts* (*Beaux-Arts*,

Schöne Künste, Bellas Artes, etc.), which ruled over the art world before Duchamp. (DE DUVE, 2018, pp. 39-40)

Art-in-General is thus synonymous with “the post-Duchamp condition”, a condition valid for all artists living in the post-Duchamp era, whether they paint still lifes in oil on canvas or perform actions in public that do their best to push the limits of art beyond the acceptable. And *art-in-general* is the aesthetic regime for all the art made under the condition of *Art-in-General*. One of this regime’s main consequences is that painting still lifes in oil is no longer automatically legitimated under the banner of painting as medium or art form – or, for that matter, threatened by the more “advanced” state of painting under abstraction – but is in direct competition with all other media, including performances that seek to push the limits of art. As for such performances, they are no longer legitimated by the will to put an end to painting or to pursue an ever-going escalation on the latest avant-gardes, but compete on equal footing with more traditional practices. The *art-in-general* aesthetic regime has exposed the need for quality judgments that address *art as such*, no matter the medium, the style, or the aesthetic ideology⁵.

We presently live under the *Art-in-General* condition and appreciate art under the *art-in-general* aesthetic regime, that much is sure: said condition and regime characterize our *contemporaneity*. To what extent do they deserve to be designated as “post-Duchamp”? It may be tempting to look for an answer in Duchamp’s influence on subsequent artists, or in the readymades’ influence on subsequent art. This has been done very often, with little result besides blowing Duchamp’s responsibility for this state of things out of proportions, whether in praise or contempt, and overrating the notion of influence in the process. It is that notion, much more than those of style or art movement *per se*, that undergirds historicism. It provides the kind of continuity that is needed in order to apply the “ages of life” metaphor to an evolving tradition, in other words, in order to explain how one style evolves into another or how one art movement evolves out of another. Discontinuity is then provided by such concepts as “the pendulum” or “reaction against”: a painterly generation alternates with a linear one, etc. – the Wölfflinian paradigm; the minimalists reacted against the abstract expressionists, the cubists had to kill father Cézanne, etc. – the oedipal paradigm. Being fixated on Duchamp’s influence leads nowhere except to the

tautological confirmation of the influence of influence: it's a bag out of which you pull the rabbit you had previously put into it.

If influence doesn't explain to what extent our contemporaneity deserves to be designated as "post-Duchamp", what does? The readymades' public career was launched with *Fountain*, the famous and infamous urinal signed R. Mutt and dated 1917, which Duchamp sent in for the first exhibition of the New York Society of Independent Artists, and which the founders of the Society rejected, for a good reason. Even ten years after *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, there was no way a urinal, even signed and dated, even tipped on its side, would have been accepted as art. Yet the art world we live in today has not only embraced Duchamp's urinal but also treats it as its philosophically most paradigmatic work of art – witness Kosuth. Apparently, sometime between *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and Kosuth, a sea change occurred, which missing links between the specific and the generic cannot smoothen out, for it was not a change in styles but rather in aesthetic regimes, not a change in art movements but rather in art institutions, a change that is perhaps best approached with a formula that avoids all reference to modernism, postmodernism, or contemporaneity and is hopefully capable of drawing a general consensus: *Fountain*

is situated at the juncture of two art worlds, one in which a urinal *cannot* possibly be art and one in which *this* urinal is art.

If I may risk an analogy, the difference between these two art worlds is so stark, so brutal, so absolute that the transition from the former to the latter is akin to the switch from a monarchy to a republic. There are not many ways such a switch can occur: either the king abdicates or he is deposed, and the republic is proclaimed. The revolution needs not be bloody; the switch could even theoretically happen without a revolution taking place; but a gradual transition from monarchy to republic is unthinkable: you wake up one morning a citizen, no longer a subject. The point of the political analogy is not to stress, as has been done only too often, how revolutionary *Fountain* was or how transformative Duchamp's gesture was, politically or art-politically. The analogy is no more than an analogy. Its point is to underline in what new terms the post-Duchamp periodization problem appeared to me once I saw *Fountain* situated at the juncture of two successive, incompatible art worlds, as I finally did in my latest, forthcoming book, *Duchamp's Telegram* (DE DUVE, 2022).

Once accepted as art, *Fountain* comfortably inhabits the art world I called the Art-in-General system (capitalized and

hyphenated), where anything and everything can *a priori* be art. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* was in its day no less difficult to accept as art than a urinal, but if it probed the limits of painting, it didn't challenge the limits of the Fine Arts *system* – the very system, or institution, or art world, which the *Art-in-General* system replaced. Indeed, it makes no sense to speak of a post-Picasso art world. What is thus remarkable about the transition to the post-Duchamp art world is that it has remained invisible as such: as break, as fracture, as event. Whereas changes such as the switch from monarchy to republic are historical markers remembered as such – they are precisely dated; they leave indelible traces in history books; they are so conspicuous nobody can ignore them – there is no direct record, no historical marker, no memorial to the date when the Fine Arts system transitioned to the Art-in-General system. When did the revolution happen? Where? How fast and sudden was it? Who triggered it? What triggered it? Was it *Fountain*? The discipline of art history seems not to be equipped to treat problems of periodization complicated by the apparent agency of a single artwork at the juncture of two art worlds. Yet the passage could not have happened gradually: the Beaux-Arts system morphing seamlessly into the Art-in-General system is

as inconceivable as a monarchy smoothly becoming a republic. A revolution seems to have occurred, radical and absolute, but as far as I know not one art history book has recorded it. For it is not the (r)evolution in styles or art movements the history of modern art usually narrates. Cézanne's late paintings morphing into Braque's early cubism, morphing into Braque and Picasso's hermetic cubism, morphing into their *papiers collés*, morphing into Picasso's cardboard constructions and guitars, morphing into Schwitters's *Merzbau* and Duchamp's readymades, is a familiar story; in no way does it account for the transition from the Fine Arts to the Art-in-General system. *Duchamp's Telegram* is a book that addresses a periodization problem that stares us in the face yet which the discipline of art history has so far not even identified.

This paper is the place for a few *a posteriori* reflections, not the place to expound in full the solution *Duchamp's Telegram* proposes to this periodization problem. I just want to reflect on how the basic intuition I had early on, but wasn't able to theorize at the time, progressively yielded a historically argued thesis, which I call the invention of non-art. This intuition was that the transition from the specific to the generic – which I now see as the

transition from the Fine Arts system to the Art-in-General system – had to be articulated around *negation*. Here is, in the simplest terms, the “logic” of this intuition: before the readymades can be positively ascertained as art, they must be *associated* with art. (No one spontaneously associates a bottle rack, a snow shovel, or a urinal with art.) This is done, of course, via the readymades’ claim to art status. But it can be done only negatively, through the art categories the readymades do *not* belong to. A bottle rack, a snow shovel, or a urinal are not painting, not sculpture, not architecture, and of course not music, not poetry, and so on; they do not belong to any of the fine arts. The readymades stand with respect to the fine arts on the *generic* side of an exclusive disjunction (either/or) on the other side of which stands each of the *specific* arts they do not belong to. Something is either a painting or it is not. If it is not, it can be *anything* except a painting. If it is not a sculpture either, it can be *anything* besides painting and sculpture. Etc. With each specific negation, a virtual generic *reservoir* of things that cannot be art because they don’t partake of *an* art in particular is constituted. This generic *reservoir*, I maintain, is non-art.

Most people in the art world know or think they know that non-art is a subgenre of art, whose subversive negativity

has petered out since the '60s, when it was popular, and whose paternity they attribute to Duchamp and/or the Dadaists. But Duchamp did not invent non-art. Neither did the Dadaists. No one invented non-art, that strange no man's land populated with things that apparently succeed in being art by not being art. If *Fountain* is a piece of non-art, it is not because Duchamp *threw into* that no man's land an object that sought to be art by paradoxically negating every possible artistic quality. It is because he *extracted from* that no man's land an object that claimed to be art while not belonging to any of the fine arts. The fact that the no man's land of non-art existed prior to Duchamp pulling a urinal out of it implies two things, of which I also had the intuition early on but which I wasn't able to theorize satisfactorily until *Duchamp's Telegram*. The first is that negation was not on the artists' side. It was not Duchamp, it was the founding members of the Society of Independent Artists, who denied *Fountain* art status, in a blatant betrayal of their principles. No jury, no prizes. The second is that the decisive chain of events (the elusive revolution, if you want, which I claim coincides with the invisible advent of non-art) happened before Duchamp – not just before the Richard Mutt case (as the repressed scandal around the urinal got to be known), but

before Duchamp's birth! I claim (and argue at length in the book) that non-art progressively emerged from a string of negations that took the form of rejections from the Salon, in an interval of time precisely delimited by the dates 1863, the year of the Salon des Refusés, and 1917, the year of the Richard Mutt case, with as pivotal date 1880, the year of the last state-sponsored French Salon.

Now we begin to see what was so unique to the post-Duchamp periodization problem. Duchamp was the messenger – not the author or the agent – of a sea change in the art world, the correct perception of which was hindered by the confusing expression “post-Duchamp,” for it predated Duchamp's birth. On either side of that sea change, two definitions of non-art help us understand the change: (1) Non-art is the category of things that claim candidacy to art status and yet are denied the aesthetic appreciation such things demand because, in the Fine Arts system, more precisely, in the French Beaux-Arts system, they cannot be art. (2) Non-art is the category of things that can be art because the French Beaux-Arts system, and with it the Western Fine Arts system as a whole, has yielded to the global Art-in-General system, and yet are denied that possibility because the transition has not been recognized. To call *Fountain* a work of art is to recognize this

transition, and vice versa: to recognize this transition is to call *Fountain* a work of art. My focus since *Pictorial Nominalism* on the issue of the name – the specific name of painting and the generic name of art – has received in *Duchamp's Telegram* a less obsessive outlet. When I embarked on the project of that book, I knew axiomatically that if *Fountain* was situated at the border of two art worlds, one in which a urinal cannot be art and one in which this particular urinal is art, crossing the border entailed calling this urinal art. Now that the book is written, my focus is on the converse: how is it that *calling* this urinal art entails crossing the border?

What I have commented in this paper is the solution to a particular, indeed unique periodization problem. Can this solution be generalized? Can this approach to periodization be applied to other cases? Does it offer a model for periodization problems in general? Is there a theoretical or perhaps meta-theoretical lesson to be drawn from this singular example? I don't think so. Or rather, yes, I do think so, but it's a frustrating lesson. In the hard sciences, scientificity is defined by the ideal repeatability of experimental protocols. The humanities, which

are not experimental sciences, relinquished that ideal, but they still aim for some methodological generalizability based on the exemplarity of case studies. In art history, the exemplarity of individual cases is aesthetic. And in aesthetics, exemplarity does not proceed from the particular to the general but rather from the singular to the universal. It may be frustrating for art historians to renounce the comfortable certainty that the results of one case study are transferrable to the next, but the pleasure of discovering universal signification in the most singular features of works of art is a reward worthy of the sacrifice.

NOTES

- 1.** On contemporaneity and the contemporary, see SMITH (2009).
- 2.** Breton's definition of the readymade as an "Ordinary object promoted to the dignity of art object simply by the artist's choice" is to be found in BRETON; ÉLUARD (1938, p. 23, translation mine).
- 3.** For my comment on artistic "isms," see chapter 4 of *Kant after Duchamp*, "The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas," footnote 42.
- 4.** See chapters 3 and 4 of *Kant after Duchamp*, "The Readymade and the Tube of Paint," and "The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas".
- 5.** For my definition of *art as such*, see chapter 3 of *Aesthetics at Large, Vol. I*, "The Post-Duchamp Condition: Remarks on Four Usages of the Word 'Art'".

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