

# VALUING DISORDER

*Perspectives on Radical Contingency in Modern Society*

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between social and individual forms of ordering social life on one hand, and the emergence of a number of 'spheres' of disorder in the experience of life on the other. In modern society such evidence of disorder can only be characterised in terms that reinforce the negative or formless experience of the human confrontation with disorder. Manifestations of radical contingency (taken as the cognitive residue of such disorder) in experience are thus contrasted with the progress and limits of reason and desire (which create the 'valuable' part of life), and these are further examined within a language of being that establishes the discordant nature of the relationship.

It is argued that reason and desire, in creating value, always construct an edifice of social and personal expectation that is justified on the basis of the reliability of causal relations between phenomena in lived experience, and in so doing 'make' an objective and orderly social world.

Several notions central to an understanding of the accumulation of categories of being in modern society are examined as the positive expression of the conditions of autonomous action, and thus as crucial determinants of value and identity. The central relationship is further investigated through the elaboration of three negative categories of experience, which are seen to contain individual and social forms of action that forcefully remove, or contradict order and autonomous freedom as it is here defined. The thesis is therefore divided into three parts. Part 1 examines the *loss* of autonomy through gambling, and specifically through the singular experience of the wager, which is seen to be an intensification of the motion that constitutes life, but that boldly refuses to be contained, as rational autonomy would dictate. Part 2 deals with the atomisation of knowledge and experience in modern society, looking specifically at instances of 'non-representational' art of the twentieth century as the *residue* of developments that had as a positive aim the

refinement of experience. Part 3 deals with the material exclusion of various kinds of *garbage* resulting from both social and technological progress, and from the emergence of a multiplicity of opportunities for the establishment of self-identity that are seen as both a product of dividing the world of experience into ever smaller categories (i.e., the refinement of the 'objective' world) and of the subjective relationship between the individual in modern society and the world of objects.

It is argued that the dependence of categories thus employed (in ordering both phenomenal experience and the object world) rest on a language of being that establishes the exclusivity of identity relations, and as such creates order from the radically indeterminate ground of being. It is further argued that forms of experience that move beyond bounded autonomous action or away from objective representations of the world reveal the fragility of this order. It is concluded that the regulating principle implicit in all forms of ordering can be understood to exclude the degenerate, the unidentifiable, and the fragmentary as a means of sustaining life against the radically contingent, and thus that value in social being can only be consequent upon the experience of disorder.

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PLATE 1. EXPLODED PIECE, Jackie Winsor, 1980-82.



## INTRODUCTION

They would think it unreasonable if, while the whole heaven and each of its parts have order and reason in their shapes and powers and periods, there is no such thing in the first principles but, [as Heraclitus says], *the most beautiful world is like a heap of rubbish aimlessly piled up.*

THEOPHRASTUS  
*Metaphysics*

## § Acting and Being

### *Or, the Masks of the Imperceptible*

#### *Habeas Corpus*

At times like this it is difficult to avoid the intrusion of self-consciousness. Let me explain. The body of any order is only brought to bear, only presented, by means of a way in from the outside, by revealing what constitutes the order: an *introduction*, so to speak. I happen to stand on the inside, and hope that I may be able to show you the way in. An introduction is therefore also a welcome, an invitation, and a way of showing – in short it is the point of insertion that leads the way to the body.

This deserves mention because I am self-conscious enough to know that in describing the order that I give to my subject there is a high degree of artifice involved, and that this is especially so given that the order I seek to present here has as its subject the question of *disorder*. The act of thus showing the way may appear to invalidate my own thesis, which in truncated form is found in the suggestion that the value we find in being, in living, is inherently the consequence of the disorder of things. But a note of caution is due here also: by disorder I should say that I mean that the state of being is only understood fully as a condition that undergoes constant renewal, and that order is therefore not always as determined as the language of order and value, of rational discourse, suggests. And this is the whole point of what constitutes the body of this particular order.

Neither do I intend to suggest in saying this that being is chaos, or absolute meaninglessness; on the contrary I suggest that it is rather like a rule-bound game that is for the most part understood, and in many respects, could be seen as like a game of cards, a game of poker – there is negotiation, justification, the meeting of challenges,



and so on. And so, with these counsels in mind, the order I here attempt to bring to the subject can be viewed as merely one more reshuffling of the pack of cards. I do not pretend, therefore, that this is some truth that you have before you, or that this is the *way it is*; although like all hypotheses this particular body of order is a kind of pretence, a gamble, if you like, on how this little corner of existence may be understood – or may not be, as the case may be. The meaning of this is further conveyed by suggesting that an introduction is also an ‘opening gambit,’ and whilst I may feel that in a world of games such a determination of the aim of this work would be the more appropriate designation, self-consciousness also brings convention to the fore, and thus precludes me from placing the words ‘just suppose’ at the top of the page, although as I hope to show throughout, this *just supposing* forms the significant ground for being.

### *Order and Contingency*

How can we define an order that gathers in apparently disconnected figures such as the gambler, the artist of the twentieth century, and the consumer of mass society? How can we go from the idea of the speculative motion of the wager to the idea of motion as fully realised in the never-ending accumulation of garbage? On the face of it these ideas and figures appear fragmentary, unrelated, and properly the subject of specific domains of knowledge that have developed as a consequence of the seemingly multi-faceted character of modern society. Nevertheless, every specialization takes for granted an interconnected set of assumptions and expectations – every discipline has an ontological ground, a basic acceptance of *what there is*, and of what is the proper object of intellectual endeavour. Yet, any part of such a ground may be dubious from the perspective of a different kind of specialist. Specialised knowledge will therefore overlook a significant part of experience, one that can be found in the interconnectedness of the whole. This is a common thread that runs through all specializations, connects all ideas, and mediates our understanding of archetypal figures such as those mentioned.

Chance, contingency, or radical contingency refers always to the unquantifiable *remains* of our knowledge of the state of the being at any given time. Being, in turn, is tied to questions of identity, questions that are pregnant within our capacity for understanding, which asks, eternally, the existential *what is that?* The fact that history shows the advance of reason into ever more corners of existence might suggest that the contingent will finally be eclipsed, subsumed under some great objective system that will



provide a God-like inventory of everything.<sup>1</sup> But this is to reckon without the capacity of a forward movement to destabilize reason, to *subsume objectivity* within a morass of doubt. The strategies of reason are born of and merely hide that which it cannot objectify: from speculation we suffer loss; from refinement we leave some residue; and in sorting things out we create garbage.

I look at some perspectives on radical contingency in modern society through the themes of loss, residue, and garbage. These are all linguistic categories for trying to comprehend what cannot be fully comprehended, negative categories that allow us to push aside the contingent as something that apparently has no part of meaning. The speculative curiosity of the gambler to bet all on the hope that the laws of nature might be annulled reveals that in knowledge we have safety, and that such curiosity should be kept within reasonable bounds. This, too, is reflected in the way society accepts and legitimizes the objects of plastic creation, an acceptance that is always trying to assimilate the effects of the creative process within a gaze that cannot help ordering things, and so the creative impulse is forced to break aesthetic conventions in a kind of wager as well, which ends up (by the end of the twentieth century, as I argue) presenting us with objects which only exist *as* 'objects' with the aid of a perceiving eye (which is to say, a comprehending mind). Finally, in modern consumption memory is banished in a kind of social forgetting that allows for the eventual elevation of the subject as the artist of its own creation; identity as conventionally understood is cast aside by the adoption of a succession of temporary identities – the masks or costumes of modern society that finally atomise meaning itself.

### *Acting*

We have inherited an ancient metaphysical tradition that lies within the workings of reason, and this is found in the way we give meaning to the world and in our place in it; that is to say, within a *discourse* of meaning. When Theophrastus said that the philosophers would see no sense in reason not reflecting a beautiful and orderly world he identified the root of a problem that still hangs over western thinking today, and that is the idea that a world is in some sense given – almost gifted – and exists independently of

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<sup>1</sup> This is a general point that is not intended to brush aside the questions raised by contemporary rationalists of Reason's own incompleteness. See, for example, Douglas R. Hofstadter (1980) *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid*, Harmondsworth.



us, but that we may not quite see it properly until we peel back these outer layers that conceal the real object. One thing that Theophrastus would have little idea of is that thousands of years later the language he utilised to describe the beautiful and orderly world, would – as the principal mediator of knowledge – also be the very thing that frustrates it.

One product of what follows is that the problem of philosophical realism is taken to be a non-problem on condition that we accept that reality is not this *gift*, but rather it is the creation of language, and it is language that makes the rational world, that makes the form of life, and that this is all there is.<sup>2</sup> The other *stuff* – the nameless and the formless, the contingent – is just the garbage of reason; yet this also tells that reason is itself contingent.

Thus, we only understand the empirical *givenness* of social actions, the *prima facie* evidence of social facts, within a context that includes also the ghostly presence of what is not seen, what is not yet known. Language provides an illustration of this, and is the medium that permits the elaboration of the world of facts, and so we are led to conclude from this that reality is not, as Theophrastus feared all those centuries ago, a “heap of rubbish aimlessly piled up,” but rather is the product of tidying up and giving an order to the matter of existence, and so reality is actually like a heap of rubbish that is carefully piled up into the meaningful order that allows life to proceed.

Of the many concepts central to an understanding of modern society, those of ‘person,’ ‘subject,’ and ‘individual,’ depend fundamentally on the acceptance that in rational autonomy is found the locus of some core of *will*, which is then understood within the social context of being as that element of the subjective – the active – that can be made object. In other words social action is understood only in the sense that the individual realises, or displays, a high degree of regularity and predictability in observable *movement*, and to the extent that this is found, movement becomes the basis for a distinct category of action, the rational.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1968) *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford, and R. Rorty (1980) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Oxford.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Movement’ and ‘action’ are thus not always the same. ‘Forbearance’ or ‘patience’ are highly active but need involve no movement. However, movement is usually what we see; it is what is only, so to speak, on the surface as the evidence that is then constructed in the notion of a fact. This is a highly complex issue, and one that I can only point to within the context of notions of order and disorder. See, for example, Donald Davidson (1980) *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford; Laurence Davis (1979) *Theory of Action*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.; A.I. Melden (1961) *Free Action*. London.



The difficulty here is that *action* may be identifiable on the basis of, for example, the observation of bodies in space, but this does not describe the totality of being, which extends beyond the spatial and the temporal.<sup>4</sup> We can see here an example of our metaphysical inheritance: action is taken to be what has a rational content, namely a property of the subjective, yet it is also taken to be action only to the extent that it is objectively understood, which is to say to the extent that it conforms to the expectations of reason. I refer to Theophrastus because he described (and dismissed) the fear that order is merely a mask, and must have been aware that there were doubts concerning the ‘first principles’ – knowledge – that they reflected not a meaningful order, but rather concealed an immanent disorder, the rubbish that remains formless until we find a place for it.

This ancient inheritance has clear implications for our understanding of the nature of contingency in modern society. If we fail to see that knowledge is positively expressed from a ground of contingency, then we fail to see that the more refined knowledge becomes, and the further reason extends into all corners of existence, there is a corresponding increase in contingency as the negative basis of this.<sup>5</sup>

The domain of a sociological understanding, therefore, includes not only ‘activity,’ or what is said and done and described in the categories of social understanding; it also includes ‘acting’ – not only as self-consciously rational behaviour, but as some kind of ‘front,’ or as the appearance of orderly motion based on reasonable assumptions about the social meaning of the variety of words and gestures that language conveys. The social *act* is just that insofar as we can determine the *prima facie* meaning, but this, as we know, privileges our capacity to make sense of appearances, of what is on the surface of life.<sup>6</sup> And once again it is through a consideration of the way we use language that we understand that what we see on the surface is merely the mask.

As far as action is determined by the understanding it is conveyed by a name, or what we might equally call a label, and through this it finds a place within the context of

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Martin Heidegger (1962) *Being and Time*. Oxford and Cambridge.

<sup>5</sup> There is nothing new in such a claim. This can be found in Ludwig Wittgenstein (1968) *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford; and in Willard Quine (1980) *From a Logical Point of View* – particularly in the refutation of the Vienna school in the 1953 essay ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism,’ which is reprinted in this volume, and which argued that language itself was the barrier to dealing with problems of meaning.

<sup>6</sup> Max Weber elaborated ‘meaningful’ social action in a number of possible and different ways – for the most part all action is subjectively ‘meaningful’ yet still objectively rational in virtue of his description of an *ideal type* that is seen to embody a certain objective spirit, for example, of capitalism, or of bureaucracy. See H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (1948) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. London



social discourse; it becomes *meaningful*. If we know what something *is* – if it has a name – then we are encouraged to believe that what takes place in life is understood. The social act, therefore, seems to have objective properties, yet a glance through a dictionary, for example, will show that the apparently static noun – the name – is relayed in terms of a further array of names that attempts to identify meaning but opens up, at the same time, a potentially variable field of understanding, so not only do we have the residue of the order as the negative basis; the positive expression of knowledge is mutable. And so what we say about the world, and about the social act particularly, is given through identity; that is to say identification is given in terms of something *being* something else, is expressed in statements that say that one thing or property *is* another similar thing or property.

The history of humanity, however, shows that once stable identities are replaced by new identities all the time, and that the *is* of being refers to the fluid, verb-like nature of being, and this is the aspect of being that is the imperceptible depth beneath the surface of the act. The *is* of identity therefore reveals that being is becoming, and that the identifiable act becomes then *acting*, or metaphorically speaking, the recognition of the mask that provides the surface of an analytically construed meaning.

The everyday language that mediates knowledge of existence therefore remains stuck within the logocentric traditions of Western culture, which date back as far as ancient Greece, and in which the capacity of speech, the ‘word,’ or reason to reach some truth about the world is given primacy. If we decide to call this tradition the tradition of the primacy of reason, we can say in a nutshell that reason is an accumulation of strategies for eliminating contingency from a determined existence. Nevertheless, being as the ground of reason proves resistant to these strategies because being is contingent, which is to say it is always becoming.<sup>7</sup>

### *Speculative Motion*

The notion of being-as-becoming introduces us to a difficulty for logocentric views of world and being. The verb structure of our language of being suggests that language has developed and is utilised to understand not a fixed reality, or a world *given*, but rather a changeable existence: life, in short, is motion; begins with motion, and continues as

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<sup>7</sup> See Jean-Luc Nancy (1993) *The Birth to Presence*, Stanford, CA.



motion. Modern society has gone to elaborate lengths to organize motion so as to remove contingencies, and ‘social motion,’ the entire edifice of society, as Hobbes famously realised, was a defence of life against death, with death here being the unceasing terminus of all motion in the world. This idea carries through to the present, where movement outside the bounds of expectation is often understood as ‘abnormal,’ ‘deviant,’ or evidence of ‘pathological’ states. Action is then – as the evidence of reason – motion that is controllable.

This idea of motion is a point of departure in the attempt to understand the contingency of being that is evident from the imperceptible, unknown, unfolding aspect of existence that the language of our common discourse directs us to. The edifice of society, then, can be viewed as analogous to a game, which is built upon the very activity, the acting, that determines social meaning – we all know the rules of this game, but we are unable to predict how it will all end.

As an example of this I take the reality of gambling, the gambling game, as one social manifestation of human curiosity, that like human understanding, takes place within broadly agreed upon rules and conventions, and yet which also allows for the possibility of reaching beyond what is known into the ambiguity of what is unfolding in experience.<sup>8</sup> This is the fundamental aspect of curiosity. In more or less consolidating meaning it has to question meaning. This then moves us from the particular form of the game to the core element that the gambler identifies with and which makes it unique, and this is the wager. In the wager, the fluidity of phenomenal relations, of causal mechanisms as understood by reason, and thus of being, is explored.

The wager represents speculative motion as an internal and subjective property of the gambler, and one that is therefore difficult to understand in the evidence the social world of gambling may give us.<sup>9</sup> And as I seek to show, this is also why gambling is commonly understood as irrational, and more recently as some kind of illness – precisely because the wager is an exceptional and boundless movement, and the unique core of

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Curiosity’ is a term I intend to describe a kind of speculative motion, an aspect of human agency that is not too tied to expectations. The term, however, signifies also an historically ‘located’ tendency of the natural philosophers of early modernity. Cf. L. Daston and K. Park (1998) *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*, New York.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Edward Devereux. (1980) *Gambling and the Social Structure*, New York; Erving Goffman (1969) ‘Where the Action Is’ in *Interaction Ritual*, London; and Roger Caillois (1979), *Man, Play, and Games*, London.



the gambling endeavour, it is not susceptible to the kind of objectification given through a rational categorisation. It is seen not as rational action, but as an exception to this.<sup>10</sup>

There are gamblers, of course, who never break the liminal bounds in the experience of the wager. The existential extremity of the wager as I discuss it exists on a different plane from the everyday 'intermission' of what is called petty gambling. The gamblers here, as I say, might as well be gambling with their lives because there is more at stake in the extreme experience of the wager than money, or prestige, or anything else that seeks social assent. These gamblers I discuss are seen in the process of radical self-creation, of fast-forwarding their own existence to the point where the experience becomes socially incommunicable, and devoid of any meaning in these terms. Games, by contrast, are socially understandable, and in sociological explorations are conveyed in terms of objective characteristics – for instance in terms of cultural, class, or gender aspects of involvement. I leave these considerations aside to suggest that the game is only the vehicle towards a 'stretching' of social identity, which is where the wager takes the gambler, and this is the real sociological significance of such an act.

### *Plasticity and Refinement*

We can understand the notion of the mask in a number of ways. The mask is not only the literal surface that we perceive, the 'face' or appearance, but also refers to the tendency of understanding to move towards refinement as a consequence of *masking off*, or delimiting an area of interest (as you would employ 'masking tape' to identify an area of a surface to be painted, for example), and this is seen in both of these regards in artistic creation – but the metaphor operates in other senses in this regard as well, because of the ludic quality of artistic creativity; in performance, which is very much the donning of a costume or a mask, and also in the framing of a world that is found in painting. The mask also has a more literal association with strange objects carved of wood, rendered into terrifying visages by various adornments of figure, paint, and objects like feathers. These masks were worn in primitive societies to aid various kinds of

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<sup>10</sup> The classification of gambling as an illness is, of course, the result of the establishment of new categories of behavioural understanding, specifically those given in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association. This is the predominant trend within a recently established field of gambling studies, and is also an excellent demonstration of how the human understanding finds a subject of study as a result of defining a category.



transformation; to mark coming of age rituals, fertility festivals, rain dances and so on.<sup>11</sup> I argue that the notion of the mask is an apt metaphor for some developments in non-representational 20<sup>th</sup> century art in the sense that disguise was employed to reveal both the ambiguity of the artistic object, and the tendency of the art world to organise objects into an apparently recognisable aesthetic order, which is also a form of disguise.

Artistic creation in modern society, I suggest, develops a self-critical and self-conscious awareness to the point that it understands the world 'made' by reason as a notion of objectivity, as a mask, that conceals the contingency of being; which is to say it sets apart the sphere of creativity – the new or unknown. The world reason makes here, the art world, is the world of regulated experience, of the world now understood as a field of sensual experience and aesthetic phenomena.

Non-representational art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century refers not to an essential reality but rests on figures, signs, images, surfaces, and so on, and so the form itself reveals the contingency of the 'pictures' we make of the world.<sup>12</sup> In fact, in extreme examples, the 20<sup>th</sup> century art object becomes realised not as an immutable object, but as indivisibly subjective in its representative mode because it is so objectively meaningless in the important sense that it ends up owing its meaning to the viewer. This is taken to the limit in art that dematerializes the objective properties of the functional object world. The found objects of art suspend the conventions of meaning in favour of presenting aspects of the ground that is rearranged in meaning.

We bring this home most forcefully by moving beyond artistic creation, which in the 20<sup>th</sup> century extends from the ideal or the eternal to the fleeting: from the sublime to the profane as revealed through the objects we consume, which begin showing up first in collage within the frame, and thence as a means of destroying the expectations of a 'framing eye.' Thus, the eventual material and linguistic product of the contingency found in this curiosity and in the residue of aesthetic refinement is found in garbage, both physical and metaphorical.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1983) *The Way of the Masks*, London; and A. David Napier (1986) *Masks, Transformation, and Paradox*. Berkeley.

<sup>12</sup> See Mark C. Taylor (1992) *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, and Religion*. Chicago.



*Sorts*

Consumption makes us at once the artists and the objects of our own identity; but in creating the consuming act destroys the object world. Our relationship to objects is seen in both the renewal of identity and the re-ordering of the object world through the collection of ever more objects that we identify with. The principal condition of this renewal is found in our capacity to forget, and forgetting on an individual basis is reflected in the collective and strategic ignorance that reason demands as a condition of its own progress, and that we see in the development of specialization in the production of objects. This, too, introduces a mutually sustaining relationship between the subjective and objective realms of existence. The product of this development is found in the lack of regard we give to physical garbage. The remains of life are in their own way sorted – into bins, trashcans, dumps, holes in the ground, incinerators, and so on – and the means of this sorting remains largely hidden to us, and so almost completes a collective blindness to the life of the objects, from their ‘birth’ in consumption to their ‘death’ in discarding, from which we construct our fragile identities.

However, no matter how elaborate the social conditions of life become in allowing us to forget, one crucial component of human understanding cannot remain buried for long, and that is the doubt that memory, or self-reflection brings to the surface. In memory we make an orderly world, we make sense of things by promoting certain experiences above others; objects and events are assimilated in the making of the self. But memory is also a swamp. It becomes overwhelmed by the physical reality of dead matter, of the contingency of existence, when garbage becomes visible, and the surface order is thus seen to conceal a depth – the depth of self-consciousness – elements of which rise to the surface like the occasional activity on the surface of a swamp; disappearing eventually, but formless and indeterminate enough in its appearance to disgust.

Material garbage represents the truth that no matter ever disappears, and that reality is therefore just the creation of a language that recycles, that builds meaning from the mutability of profane existence.

ONE

LOSS

So use all that is called Fortune. Most men gamble with her, and gain all, and lose all, as the wheel rolls  
... In the Will work and acquire, and thou hast chained the wheel of Chance, and shalt always drag her  
after thee.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON  
*Self Reliance*

Curiosity is animated by a speculative attempt to attain a firm grasp on time and place. To understand what strikes us as anomalous, or to grasp the hidden of allure of some natural wonder, is to exercise concern about what goes on around us throughout our lives.

In reason, curiosity is directed within certain constraints; to what is perceptible, or to what, in other words, coheres in a sensible manner. Thus, where a child may marvel at the absolute wonder of a phenomenon like the shooting grass that seems to depart from nowhere, to an adult the wonder is replaced by blindness. Reason, which develops with age and maturity, has no longer any need of such curiosity because it directs the mind away from the ordered path of previous lives, which have brought us to the present on the basis of a sound grasp of relations between phenomena.<sup>1</sup>

Curiosity, nevertheless, is also what drives the rational scientific mind to consolidate our understanding of the world; whilst every hypothesis is a speculative stab at the future, a determined move that says 'just suppose,' it is still a move that is made gradually, with care, and stopping short of plunging into the unknown.

The speculative aspect of curiosity is never overcome however. Where society becomes ordered through the historical application of reason to the control of social relations, we see in 'deviant' or 'exceptional' social phenomena a subjective removal from these confines; a withdrawal from the normal expectations thus occurs within modern society. This can be summed up in the character of the gambler. Where life itself is

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. early modern notions of curiosity in, for example, Paula Findlen (1994) *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*, Berkeley, and Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park (1997) *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*, New York.



motion, and where society is a regulated form of life, the gambler takes flight from the apparent permanence of social relations to engage in the oscillatory motion found in a transient existence that flits back and forth from the unity of being characteristic of normality to the sensory and existential dispersal of self found through the wager.

However, exceptional though gambling is, it is merely an intensification or speeding up of the regulated movement of social life. An important duality in our understanding of modern society also describes a movement back and forth, between work and leisure. For the most part the oscillatory motion here never becomes pronounced enough to effect an erosion of being – we are, in other words, never too far from the rational ordering of our lives that assumes to protect us against, for example, moral, physical or mental decline.

The gambler, however, courts *loss*. In the singularity of the experience of the wager the gambler repeatedly takes up temporary residence in a gap between existence and non-existence. The loss for the gambler is taken further in a diminution of the power of self-will, which sees the gambler return to the scene of past defeats. This shell of a person moves forward, retreats, and moves forward again occupies the body of a person much like a zombie. The gambler is the revenant – returning from inbetweenness to try and reclaim a mislaid autonomy.

# 1 Architecture of Motion

There is no fullness of pleasure unless the precipice is near.

ANATOLE FRANCE, *The Garden of Epicurus*

Picture this scene. Two men, seen in a grassy meadow, slowly move an apparently irreducible pile of large, misshapen stones, carrying them to a central point in the plain. Once in position these form, from a detached perspective, the foundations for what will eventually be a perfectly straight wall.

The meadow also provides the grounds for a large house situated adjacently and hidden behind some trees, which encircle the clearing. In this house the two men have recently lost a game of poker. Inside the house another man, a rather prissy, formal, man dressed in a brilliant white suit, stands above a large model and puts a part into place (Plate 2). It is a stone – a small replica model of a stone to be precise – and this, in turn, is placed within a model wall. The building of this model seems to correspond to the activities of the two men outside, who are labouring hard in the rain much of the time. Or, we are invited to consider, the men building the wall are themselves merely actors in a great drama that is orchestrated by the curious architect who is the model maker.

## *Motion and the Absolute*

In another representation of such architecture of motion, found in William Blake's depiction of the great creator, *The Ancient of Days*, we see the Almighty confer an order upon creation. This, it is clear, is the bequest of an omnipotent will that bestrides and orders life itself, having dominion over all below (Plate 3).<sup>1</sup> The similarity between Blake's vision of the Almighty and the model maker is in the relation it throws up between ideas of order and 'architect'; the latter is understood both in terms of a self-



moving capacity, autonomy, and also as the signifier of an objective organizer of movements. The model wall that provides the domain for the white-suited architect also contains the figures of the two men and is presented as an objectively ordered creation; enclosed, bound and finite. It is not a model of *the* World, to be sure, but of a 'City of the World,' an idealistic utopia in miniature conforming to the design of a righteous social harmony, which seeks the Absolute status of *logos*, which is to say that it assumes the status of an atemporal transcendental truth. We see this miniature City of the World explained as a 'just' world where "good finally triumphs over evil". A world where everything that happens is properly apportioned; where excess and defect are met by an appropriate corrective, and by nothing less than the forced return of the weak and foolish to the *straight and narrow* from which they have momentarily deviated.

This is also, in yet another variant of absolutist control, like the world found in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* of 1651, in which the earliest modern ideas of reason as a means to avoid death are introduced, and formalized in the 'rational binding' of subjects under a sovereign will that operates as the architect of predictable social motion (Plate 4).<sup>2</sup>

To return to the meadow, the real wall that is under construction, and that happens to detain the two men, gamblers who have lost at a card game, is contained in a world that we are led to believe reflects the mind of an omniscient power; it is a world where "everything happens at once," which suggests that this is a world that realizes a divine, or perhaps a despotic, provenance. After all, from what other point of view could everything happen at once?

In this fictional scenario, Paul Auster's 1990 novel *The Music of Chance*, no action comes without consequence in the well-ordered City of the World. The architect, assuming dominion over motion as does Blake's Almighty, or Hobbes' Sovereign Artificer, decrees that known causes have predictable effects, and specific acts produce equally definite outcomes. This, too, reflects the concern evident within the work of the

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<sup>1</sup> This image was produced in 1794 as the frontispiece of Blake's *Europe: A Prophecy*.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hobbes' 'Sovereign Artificer', in the first truly modern analysis of civil society, *Leviathan* (1991), presented the consequences of action beyond reasonable conduct to devastating effect. Shown in an illustration on the title page of this work is the Sovereign, the Nemesis-like consequence of an unruly world. Like Blake's divine creator, he hovers over his domain, although not with a compass but with sword and staff (representing power temporal and ecclesiastical?) overseeing the artificial construct that is the political commonwealth. In chapter 16, 'Of Persons, Authors and things Personated,' Hobbes notes that "Children, Fooles, and Mad-men that have no use of Reason, may be Personated by guardians, or Curators; but can be no authors (during that time) of any action done by them, longer then (when they shall recover the use of Reason) they shall judge the same reasonable." (113)



earliest modern philosophers that *knowledge* be established on the basis of what we can apprehend through the senses; thus, in Hume's language, the constant conjunction of contiguous phenomena is a good enough ground in principle to establish knowledge – although most causes remain unknown.<sup>3</sup> We are left in no doubt that the consequences of objective causality, as far as it could be determined that is, should act as an example to the 'people' who populate this utopian creation. The sketchy rules of existence in the fictional creation are conveyed in terms that intend to teach the virtues of simplicity: you do not get something for nothing is the lesson for the pair of gamblers – and most importantly the physical reality of these great stones, the Lockean 'primary qualities' they represent, tell us that that virtue itself is found in a diligent adherence to the *right action*; it is found in such basic, objectively agreed upon human ends as the meeting of needs. That is to say, in other words, the reward of simplicity is in the safety of one day following another in much the same way as always – not in reckless speculation on the nature of the laws of the universe: the work is *real* and gambling is frippery. And as we might expect virtue is manifested as a property of work, in the concentration of the mind on some temporal goal, such as the building of a wall.

We also see here that transgressions against personal moral continence, the imperative that is surely demanded in any virtuous world, are severely punished. Profligacy is damned, consolidation rewarded.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, these two men building the wall, having been forewarned a day before of the fate that befalls deviation from these principles, foolishly failed to observe such good sense, and as a result seem to have invited their own Nemesis.<sup>5</sup> This scenario plays out a number of themes common in many traditional understandings of gambling. For instance, that the folly of invoking infinite powers (by playing with chance) will result in a reminder of your temporal

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<sup>3</sup> See David Hume (1978) *A Treatise on Human Nature*. Oxford; John Locke (1976) *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. London. The development of modern science has shown that many causes remained unknown prior to technological breakthroughs, see also Catherine Wilson (1995) *The Invisible World: Early Modern Philosophy and the Invention of the Microscope*. Princeton.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Auster (1991) *The Music of Chance*, London: 68-72. Flower and Stone, the victorious players in the poker game owe their position to a windfall from a lottery. But it becomes apparent that they are not really gamblers, as this is placed well within the context of a small reward for years of diligence and hard work. They would purchase a single ticket once a week for years, all the while sticking to their routine: before the windfall they always had their weekly Deli sandwiches and lottery fantasies, now after they had become rich they were no less ordered, "Flower mentioned they always had hamburgers on a Monday night," Nashe observes as he becomes increasingly convinced that there is more going on than at first seems apparent. They also remain parsimonious despite their great wealth. At one point Stone consumes Flower's unfinished Monday night burger, adding for effect "Waste not, want not."

<sup>5</sup> Paul Auster, (1990) *The Music of Chance*, London: 76-87; quotes: 79-80.





PLATE 2. ARCHITECT OF MOTION, from *The Music of Chance*, 1993 (dir: Phillip Haas). The 'architect' establishes the bounds of motion within the 'city of the world.' With authorial power he forces an accord between the way the world ought to be, and the world he perceives and has domain over. The men building the wall are forced to accept this order, to agree on its conditions as a result of losing a wager. The settlement is enforced on the basis of its proportionateness (the wall contains 10,000 stones, one for each dollar of the gambling debt) and its correctness (it forces the two losers to *straighten* themselves out -- this is also reflected in the meaninglessness of this straight line of stones). Cf. Ian Hacking(1990) *The Taming of Chance*, Cambridge, on the etymology of 'the normal' as the right, the straight, and the good. (Ch.19)





PLATE 3. THE ANCIENT OF DAYS. William Blake, 1794. In the *Book of Daniel*, the Ancient One is presented as the holy creator of the universe: “7:13-14 I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him, and there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.” This image was published as the frontispiece to *Europe: A Prophecy* and accompanied by a quote (“When He set a compass on the face of the deep”) from the *Book of Proverbs* (8:22-23, 27-30).





PLATE 4. FRONTISPIECE OF THOMAS HOBBS' LEVIATHAN, 1651. The 'objective' power of the sovereign, as the illustration shows, is composed of the many subjects. The relationship was intended by Hobbes to be reciprocal; subjectivity of motion, would — in all but "Children, Fooles and Mad-men" — correspondingly realize an objective, rational, will. See Thomas Hobbes, 1991, *Leviathan*: 113.



mortality; that to expect a life free of work is to err; and not least that we ought by now, after many centuries of accumulated evidence, of learning, have acquired the power of inference, some knowledge of *causes*, at least to the extent that we would know that the only certain way not to lose a poker game is to refrain from playing in the first place. Safety first.

An equally interesting interpretation suggests that what is dramatized in this scene from *The Music of Chance* is the idea that loosening oneself from temporal constraints through gambling, to wager on the eternal being of atemporality, becomes, from the point of view of an architecture of motion merely unsustainable action; and that a life lived in and through disorderly or itinerant movements ultimately cannot be sustained. Because the gambler hurtles towards the future with a vain disregard for the exigencies of the temporal world, as the gamblers in this scenario do, they provoke this ‘music of chance’; in this case it is the restoration of a manufactured harmony.

The inability to calm movement, to control one’s actions, thus throws up the possibility of self-negation. For if life is all motion, and if in pursuing the itch for play the gambler adds speed to the motion – in anticipation of the wager – then surely it only threatens to bring forward one’s own demise? In *The Music of Chance* the two gamblers, Nashe and Pozzi, end up *stuck* in this meadow in the middle of nowhere; they are forced to work in order to repay their gambling debt, and so like prisoners they no longer have the power to determine their own movements.<sup>6</sup> Like Thomas Hobbes wrote in 1651, those that have no use of reason will be ‘personated’ by guardians; they can no longer be ‘author’ of their own actions.

Of our two gamblers, Jack Pozzi, a professional card player is ostensibly the gambler of the tale. Having been hijacked at gunpoint whilst actually playing poker the day before he met Jim Nashe, and only several days before he now finds himself building this wall, we see that he must have been well aware of the dangers of such a life, as he recounts the reasons for his disheveled appearance to Nashe:

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<sup>6</sup> In some of the literature of gambling studies, the gambler is already taken to be a prisoner of sorts. The ‘compulsion’ to gamble, for example, is taken to be as confining as the constraints on movement that are characteristic of imprisonment. In the remainder of this section I discuss why this characterization is a merely another application of a notion of normality as regulated motion. Amongst the literature in this field see, for example, Henry Leiseur (1984) *The Chase: The Career of the Compulsive Gambler*. Cambridge, MA. Most work in this field departs from a starting point of Sigmund Freud’s well-known essay ‘Dostoevsky and Parricide,’ see J. Strachey (ed.) (1950) *Collected Papers*,



It's weird how fast things can happen. One minute, I'm about to raise the guy on my left, thinking what a smart, high-class dude I am, and the next minute I'm flat on the ground, hoping I don't get my brains blown out.

It is not at all apparent at this point that Nashe is a gambler. Instead we see that he is a restless traveller who has been living out of a suitcase for over a year: "traveling back and forth across America as he waited for [his] money to run out." Eventually it becomes clear that he is the real gambler of the piece.<sup>7</sup>

In devising a means of restitution in the form, more or less, of punishment, the two victors, in suggesting that the wall be built to cover the debt are seen to be the bearers of every western notion of temperance, hard work and stability.<sup>8</sup> This wall, upright, straight and true is an emblem for the maintenance of moral and physical health. The absurdity of their situation is finally revealed by the knowledge that this wall is on the one hand meaningless because it does not protect any property, it does not offer any possibility of exclusion (it is a wall one can walk around); yet on the other hand it becomes meaningful because it confers an order and stability on the lives of the two men. In submitting them to a 'normal' routine, it trains them in work. It forces them to obey the rules of a temporal existence, the rules of this City of the World.<sup>9</sup> That this wall is built so straight from the formal material of the roughly hewn stones, corresponds metaphorically to the *straightening out* of Nashe and Pozzi; the moral direction of motion as adherence to the *straight* or the *true* acts as a reminder that any movement whatsoever is the basis of contingent being, that to move forward is to invite chance.

Gambling in particular, as the motion towards the suspension of reality found in the wager, does no more or less than promote the inflation of contingency when what is known is cast aside in this speculative act. Thus, the moral of this tale is understood by

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vol. 5. The best collection of literature on this topic can be found in J. Halliday and P. Fuller (eds.) (1974) *The Psychology of Gambling*, London.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Auster, (1990) *The Music of Chance*, London: 27.

<sup>8</sup> In Freud's 'Dostoevsky and Parricide,' *ibid*, it is suggested that the gambler seeks this kind of masochistic punishment.

<sup>9</sup> The symmetry between the crime (the gambling debt) and the punishment (building the wall) is perfect: they owe ten thousand dollars, and they must build a wall of ten thousand stones. This is putting money to work, rather than dissipating it at the gambling table. See Ian Hacking (1990) *The Taming of Chance*, Cambridge, where the author discusses some ancestors of the modern formulation of 'normality' For example, in modern European languages the word is derived from geometry, meaning "perpendicular, at right angles, orthogonal [...] Normal and orthogonal are synonyms in geometry [...] A line may be orthogonal or normal (at right angles to the tangent of a circle say) or not. That is a description of the line. But the evaluative 'right' lurks in the background of right angles. It is just a fact that an angle is a right one, but it is also a 'right' angle, a good one. Orthodontists straighten out the teeth of children: they make the crooked straight. But they also put teeth right, make them better. Orthopaedic surgeons straighten bones": 162-63.



throwing into opposition the attractions of pragmatic and ordered living on the one hand, with the unseen fate that awaits the gambler on the other, and suggests that it is best to move in an orderly fashion, avoiding any unexpected twists, turns, or deviations.<sup>10</sup>

### *The Inbetweenness of Experience*

However, experience also tells a slightly different story. Whilst modernity realizes a rational ordering of movement, it also provides a challenge to this in establishing its domain on the basis of the subjective will, free and sovereign, and this is what provides grounds for conflict. Modernity elevates the individual to a status that is prior to all else, and thus we have the distinctively modern view of the individual as the irreducible core of value, of the subject as ‘end-in-itself,’ to use the language of a modern moral philosophy as elaborated by Immanuel Kant.<sup>11</sup> Yet, we see that everywhere in modern life the individual is easily identified in terms that distort the meaning of this value. The modern world’s obsession with quantifying all aspects of life is a sorting of subjectivity according to certain apparent objective properties. The subject becomes effectively, a pile of attributes – nationality, gender, racial origin, and so on – that can be hastily assembled, *aggregated*, into social types (or more likely, consumer categories).<sup>12</sup>

This urge to pin things down, to establish firm and reliable definitions, is at once a denial to the sovereign subject, and also in promoting subjective identification with an empirical ‘reality’ is an attempt to undermine the inherent contingency of a being that is always being born. It is an attempt to be certain about things, and in the most general sense it is seeking a way to regulate movement precisely because movement is the condition of being itself; and this refers not only to physical movement, but also the movement of identities, meanings, and discourses. And the desire of modern society to

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<sup>10</sup> See Gerda Reith (1999) *The Age of Chance: Gambling in Western Culture*, London: 81-87.

<sup>11</sup> See Robert B. Pippin (1991) *Modernity as a Philosophical Problem*, Oxford: 1-15; and Harvie Ferguson (2000) *Modernity and Subjectivity*: 1-19, for different ways of looking at the notion of the ‘subject’. Ferguson, taking Descartes as a starting point, notes that, “A fundamental shift has occurred. Where, for the premodern world, human experience was always defined as subordinate to, and dependent upon, a greater, extraempirical reality which it symbolized, Modernity, in its most general form, reverses this relation and identifies the real with the experienced.” (3) Pippin, departing from a perspective of German Idealism, suggests that the modern social compromise, rational autonomy, resulting from an urge to control rests on the failure of morality, which becomes evident in the practical limits of ‘human nature’, and this forces us to settle for legality not morality. This was perhaps in the mind of Hobbes as well as it seems to form the basis for sovereign power in *Leviathan* (11-12), although the effect would seem to compromise autonomy thus understood.

<sup>12</sup> The ends to which such attributes can be put are discussed, for example, in Geoffrey C. Bowker, and Susan Leigh Star (1999) *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences*. Cambridge, MA.



banish 'error' in this regard conceals a tension between the subjective desire for movement and an objective inclination to regulate movement. The interesting thing to note is that these both reside within the individual. This compromise is a Hobbesian accommodation of the subject in society.<sup>13</sup>

To the extent that reconciling these two sources of motion becomes increasingly difficult in modern society, we see merely that the subjectivity of motion is ultimately irresistible. That it breaks out of the order that provides, ultimately, the framework or the 'vehicle' for rational thought and action. So, the problem of reconciling subject with object lies in the fact that the acceleration of modern life, and the pace with which change is forced upon us, inhibits the creation of finite identities. The potential for movement becomes apparent in modernity with the creation of an infinity of objects with which we can identify; relations are established and broken with a careless brevity that makes the reconciliation of the subject with 'reality' impossible.

If relations become fluid in modern society, are only established superficially, then it makes it difficult to stand still in the midst of it all, to stand firm when all around mutates, and thus also to be a diligent adherent to anything, or to be identifiably one thing or another for very long. This state of affairs draws us back to some fundamental distinctions. The philosophical understanding of identity tells us that all truths are true only contingently; which is to say that all truths might not always be true – that this is a notion that changes – and so we should not expect that that the accuracy of identification will be firm whilst the human understanding continues to seek more secure foundations for knowledge. So, the way we speak about phenomena, the everyday language we use to identify and refer to the world can, on closer examination, reveal the barely hidden contingency of being, particularly insofar as our language conventions serve to pull a veil over the meaningless. But more seriously, the difficulty of establishing

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<sup>13</sup> Hobbes's significance is, I would argue, apparent both in terms of his method (of resolution and composition), and in the conclusions he draws for morality (his scepticism of the power of self-regulation). It can be argued that Hobbes created a world from a host of arbitrarily defined, historical objects, and sought to universalize them, thus determining that society is composed of a collection of social atoms. The contentious nature of this outcome is not contested here, but is dealt with elsewhere. See, for example C.B. MacPherson (1962) *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford). The point I want to stress, and that is important to my theme of movement having a degenerative tendency, is that Hobbes went from a notion of man as internal motion *in* matter, that is to say, from a notion in which everything begins with the (rather loosely defined, perhaps) subject, on experience that is grounded on the sensation of motion, to a profound unease at the implications of this, and thus reaching the same kind of conclusions about morality (self-regulation was impossible because of the nature of man) that German Idealism reached (in the view of Pippin), but for different reasons that is, morality fails because of the 'death of God'. In grounding morality in sovereign power, in the law no less, had Hobbes already implicitly 'killed' God? See also D.D. Raphael (1977) *Hobbes: Morals and Politics*, London.



finite, objectively transparent identities draws us also into a premodern notion of identity as the unchanging essence of a thing.

For Aristotle identity is established not on the basis of this pile of attributes that modern society forms into some whole, but rather in the conception of the living organism as movement, and of this movement as the ever changing core of being, and that is to say that identity over a period of time is found in the persistence of some essence that remains within a continually changing material existence.<sup>14</sup> Living things are, then, a continual flux of matter, which means that identification in terms of those parts that change is not really an identification of the unchanging element. Bodily changes over time may make a person appear different, for example, but we know that something identifiable remains within this external reality – even where a person never appears to be the same, and seems to occupy limitless identities.

The implications of being conceived as an existence *lived in the present*, is that motion can do no other than unfold a baffling human geography of possibility. Being in this sense is denied from the earliest modern philosophy as a suitable candidate for the understanding, although an analogy between language and being is striking: the philosophers of the modern analytic tradition who have descended from the 17<sup>th</sup> century empiricists are willing to accept in terms of reasoning what they have dropped since Aristotle in terms of metaphysics, and that is, that the empirically-given, the noumena, is really in continual flux. Every movement within our ceaseless becoming not only carries our knowledge of a past that might have been otherwise, but it carries it into a present built, apparently, on faith or promise. It arrives in front of unknowable mutations. Not certainty as we may like to think.

And so the history of the subject is realized in modern terms at once in both Hobbesian terms, that is to say as the embodiment of this physical objectivity (society), and, we may say, in Cartesian terms as the source of an infinite subjectivity (consciousness). We can see that by distinguishing the vehicle for action from the capacity for action that gambling in modern society finally realises – specifically in the wager – a metaphysical or existential *being* that is itself a momentary denial of what Robert Pippin has called ‘the social rationalization’ of modern life, the mask of which is

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<sup>14</sup> See G.E.M. Anscombe and P.T. Geach (1961) *Three Philosophers: Aristotle, Aquinas, Frege*, Oxford: 55. There is a distinction over changes that are accidental, and those that are necessary, but one which I cannot go into here. Suffice it to say that Aristotle’s essentialism allows for the existence of a non-material soul, and this is one reason why the Ancients were discarded by Hobbes and others following, in favour of a philosophy grounded in empirical reality.



defined in terms of the identity of abstract qualities, or the pile of attributes that constitute the appearance of what is 'real.'



## 2 Vehicle, Motion and Stealth

Games always cover something deep and intense, else there would be no excitement in them, no pleasure, no power to stir us.

ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY, *Airman's Odyssey*

All action takes place within a well defined set of norms and expectations, of rules, laws, conventions, restrictions, and so on. We might think of it in the following terms: You leave your home to go to work in the morning, you *wait* for traffic to pass before you can cross the road to catch a train, or yet again, you may be in the traffic sitting in a car waiting for pedestrians to cross the road. At your place of work you come up against order and organization at all times – from the occupational hierarchy to identification codes, or names that give a face to the unseen.

The interesting thing about this, however, is that it is knowledge that passes largely unnoticed; it exists simply as the necessary routine that becomes the norm. So, it may only be on occasion that one's place within a larger 'body' becomes apparent; for example you have certain unwelcome duties you must perform, or a particularly demanding superior has unreasonable expectations of you. Even the 'non-work' part of this existence is determined for you, as the clock becomes the condition of temporal experience. You may be required to eat at a specified time, return to your home at a regulated time; you even take your holiday at a time when it has been suitably arranged – either by yourself or someone else – not to interfere with your working existence.

Of importance here is the notion that we may still refer to such apparently externally determined motion as 'active.' This is clear if we introduce a distinction between types of motion. For instance, we also partake in a variety of more or less involuntary motions, mostly on entering the 'sphere' of play, these become involuntary in that play necessitates the suspension of rational goals. So, there is work and there is play, and both are motion. Yet at the same time, the conditions of experience in modern



society, especially in modern cities, do not allow us to make such a clear cut distinction between something we designate 'active' and something entirely different, play, that indicates a loss, an absence, or even a voluntary stripping-away of the will, a submission to that which we might just call non-intentional 'movement'. As play arises from action – that is, there is a motion *to* play – it is only when caught up in the essential part of this loosening, the aspect of play that Roger Caillois distinguished as *vertigo*, that we can see a transition from the active to the non-active, that is to say the motion to play is frozen in suspense.<sup>1</sup> Until the player reaches this point of disorientation all motion has a direction.

From an objectively viewed perspective, we may glimpse human motion on a large-scale – think, for example, of taking an aerial view that would reveal all below. Movements may look to have a relatively high degree of regularity from a distant perspective, and they may appear to realize rational goals. This is not at all deceptive, but its truth lies only in the fact that such movements, are, precisely, regulated, and as such they realize some goal, an objective 'intention.' Now if we again take up this aerial perspective, then zoom in we soon realize that the situation under view – the more or less regular movement of phenomena – becomes infinitely more fine-grained.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the objectively observed motion provided by an aerial view soon looks like something other than action. For example, we see neither beginning nor end, neither origins nor destinations, and therefore the motion of the individual in a mass becomes, from the objective point of view, meaningless. From here we are atoms, and from this lofty standpoint every 'atom' also becomes like every other, interchangeable in its objectivity.<sup>3</sup> And so we may say that the urban environment as the vehicle of motion, as that which gives it regularity, 'intends' to direct movement, but we also see that in reality, and

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<sup>1</sup> See Roger Caillois (1962) *Man, Play and Games*, London: 5-10.

<sup>2</sup> I use this expression as shorthand for a complexity that is related to our power to comprehend ever more infinite details in phenomena. The notion of actions having a 'fine-grained' character is found amongst analytic philosophers of action to refer to the causal complexity of action. Inadvertently, such a move at once fudges the issue of the infinite nature of consciousness, treating it as a problem of identification in *descriptions* of action, yet, rather than providing a solution, it draws attention to the inescapable infinity of such 'quantum level' identity. Hugh McCann gives a good example of this: "In their most usual formulation, fine-grained theories treat events, and states too, as exemplifications by substances of properties at a time. In the case of actions the properties are act properties, and a criterion for individuation is provided according to which two actions are identical just in case they involve the same agent, the same property, and the same time." (18) Which is to say that there is a high level of difficulty involved in sorting out intentional actions from non-intentional events. Thus he asks "when John Wilkes Booth moved his finger, thereby firing a gun, thereby killing Lincoln, did he perform three discrete actions, or were there relations of identity or inclusion among them?" That is to say, no matter how far reason can go in offering an explanation, doubt can always be cast. See McCann (1998) *Works of Agency*, Ithaca.



within these broad regulative, physical conditions, that there is a yet more detailed human movement, and that motion originates from a non-observable base, consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

In contrasting the spatio-temporal vehicle for rational motion, with the more complicated finely grained nature of action we can see that an objective understanding goes only so far. The closer we zoom in on the apparently organised cityscape, on the individual, we see a heterogeneity in the humanly constructed landscape – it, too, composed of individuals. Here, with a barely concealed capacity for acting against reason in myriad ways are the conscious minds of these countless social atoms, potentially wayward and capable of bursting forth in unpredictable motion.

The fact that the wandering impulse is largely contained within the city and society is evident in the extent to which urban planning seeks to attain a practically assimilable consciousness of the geography: city streets, dwellings, meeting places, places of business, directional signs, are all thus vehicles for motion. That is to say our movements are mediated through, or made possible by such a vehicle.<sup>5</sup> As a determining reality the cityscape at once compromises our active impulses, and yet also permits them; our spatial and temporal environment regulates all kinds of motion by a cunning assembly of psychological barriers that, for instance, place work and leisure, play and rational freedom at opposite ends of the same continuum.<sup>6</sup>

In the modern cities of the West, space is often mapped in linear and grid-like systems, in ideal terms offering an ease of manoeuvre in subjective terms; for example in

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<sup>3</sup> On the historical background of the understanding of the subject as ‘social atom,’ see H. Ferguson (2000) *Modernity and Subjectivity*, Charlottesville: chapter one.

<sup>4</sup> We can suggest some affinity here between the observation of such movement and the Brownian motion of molecules. The irregular, oscillatory movement of particles placed in liquid and observed by powerful microscopes confirmed, for Einstein, the existence of particles. See Heinz R. Pagels (1982) *The Cosmic Code*, New York.

<sup>5</sup> The use of this Aristotelian categorization will become apparent below. For an outline of motion and vehicle, see Anthony Kenny (1989) *The Metaphysics of Mind*, Oxford: 72ff. The point here is that we must not confuse a capacity, which is potential, with its exercise, or vehicle, which is a given reality. In terms of the subjective assimilation of space Norman Crowe makes an interesting point with regard to the architecture of a building, which we may accept as a manifestation of a similar order to that sought by the city planner: “The harmonic relationship of one part a ground plan to another can only be observed in a drawing of the plan, where the whole plan, like the façade of a building, can be seen all at once. The actual experience of the ground plan while moving through the rooms and corridors of a complex building takes place in time as a sequence of perceptual events. These events must be sensed as parts of an overall conceptual framework that is not directly visible.” (102) And, “we intuitively recognize a well-ordered plan, even when we cannot tell exactly what orders that plan; we simply perceive a design unity, the source of which may not be immediately apparent.” (103) See N. Crowe (1995) *Nature and the Man-Made World*, Cambridge, MA.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Edward Devereux (1980) *Gambling and the Social Structure*, New York. Gambling is viewed as an institutionalised solution to “potentially disruptive forces” that have principally an economic basis, rather as a consequence of the ordering of social action in the sense I identify; although gambling he believed was generated by ‘normal’ behaviour and expectations reaching some breaking point, with the game acting as a release (949).



allowing one to obtain a mental picture of rectilinear motion, say, in the calculation that it will take you  $x$  minutes to get to a particular part of the city. The matrices of the grid become also part of a network of interrelated routes providing the objective infrastructure for the efficient movement of large amounts of people – public transport timetables, for example, also depend on being able to chart time over space.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the grid does not realise a determinist control over the movement that takes place within – it still manages to effect this movement of people without having “a singular focus, or clear image” and could be seen also as a particular social form of incomplete relations; thus it may actually constitute “spatial interruptions, fractures, and lags.”<sup>8</sup> In some grid systems many different routes interconnect at certain points. On ‘open grids,’ for example – that is, systems where traffic flow is multi-directional as opposed to filtered or uni-directional – the system can accommodate a variety of itineraries, responding to any number of plans, which are often at cross-purposes.<sup>9</sup>

We may not always remain conscious of the fact that movements within the cities of modern society are made within definite objective parameters. The world we inhabit is, in other words, rationally directed. In modern cities the aim is a practical one, and that is to effect the swift movement of people and goods.<sup>10</sup> The design of a rational environment is also and not incidentally intended to reduce the exceptions that would upset this order; in other words it is a construction that attempts to minimise chance and to anticipate unwelcome surprises. This fact can account for the difficulty, as Walter Benjamin wrote, of really getting lost in a city. Simply losing one’s place really only

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<sup>7</sup> Whilst no claim about space as the physical ordering of time could be made about the premodern city it is worth noting some continuities. The ancient Greek ‘polis’ had already perfected the geometrically linear style we now associate with modern cities. Perhaps modern city geometry, like that found in New York’s Long Island, for example, just realize this to an even greater extent. Thus streets are identified by number and position (at 90-degree intervals) – so, West 5<sup>th</sup> Street, and so on. In fact the ancient Greek polis was more than just the physical city. As Norman Crowe, *ibid*, says, “Central to the idea of the polis was the agreement that the polity binds the community together; each citizen of the polis is aware that he shared a destiny with all other citizens, just as all citizens share in the common history of their polis.” (N. Crowe, *ibid*. 111) It is worth asking to what extent this is still an aim of the city? See note on the planner as value technician, below. It is also important in this respect, when thinking of gambling as alterity, of the necessity of the removal of self to another place, in order to get ‘loose’, if you like. Gambling is a ‘loosening’.

<sup>8</sup> M. Christine Boyer, (1994) *The City of Collective Memory*, Cambridge, Mass.: 490-91. See also George R. Collins (1959) ‘Linear Planning Throughout the World,’ *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*. Vol. 18, 3: 74-93; and Peter Marcuse (1987) ‘The Grid as City Plan: New York City and Laissez-faire Planning in the Nineteenth Century.’ *Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 2, 3: 287-310.

<sup>9</sup> This, of course, probably simplifies the subject to an unhelpful degree. The reader who thinks this too crude, however, should see Albert Pope (1996) *Ladders*, Houston and New York. The author identifies twelve distinct grid or ‘ladder’ types.

<sup>10</sup> In historical terms it is debatable whether or not cities only existed to provide means of exchange. The ancient Greek polis (see previous footnote) was also concerned, probably primarily so, with the harmony of man and nature. Economic functions may have served this same end, as well. Aristotle, for example, speaks of *justice* in exchange, or the attainment of ‘harmony.’ See Aristotle (1980) *Nicomachean Ethics*, Oxford.



requires ignorance, perhaps the removal of the internalized geography of the city, but certainly a forgetting ('losing' oneself is, he argues, another matter). The point is that any difficulty in negotiating city terrain will only be temporary – until remedied for example by the abundant means available in the modern city for effecting a movement from one place to another. So we look at a street map; ask for directions; take a train or a bus, a taxi, and so on.<sup>11</sup>

City grids, which are known principally from the objective perspective of the map represent, as do the maps themselves, an idealized and disembodied or dispersed knowledge of the terrain – this is not a wilderness here; your expectations on turning an unknown corner of a city street will be limited, and your capacity for surprise, too, is confined by the gradual assimilation of this knowledge.<sup>12</sup> What the rational mind has achieved in this sense is something akin taking a wilderness, if we can imagine some infinite geography, and impose on it this idea, this 'reality' that is the city. Which is to say, the city becomes *object*, complete with relations of identity that substantiate causal expectations, and it is by such means that the finite order of the modern city is maintained – which is not, of course, to say that it is always well-ordered.

It may be stretching credulity to say that the modern city achieves the desired harmony of reason, but this has, nonetheless, remained as much of a concern in modern times as ancient.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the early-to-mid-twentieth century saw, for the first time, the city planner grapple with an emerging problem of an expanding urban mobility resulting from the growth in road vehicles in the previous fifty years.<sup>14</sup> This was clearly a

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<sup>11</sup> That these features are predominantly, maybe exclusively, found in the West is highlighted by the example of Tokyo. Whilst Japan since the end of the Second World War is often assumed to have taken on the modern values of the West, it seems that the Japanese city (particularly Tokyo) stands as an exception to this. Donald Ritchie notes that: "although Japanese municipalities [...] may appear to be reassuringly, or distressingly, Western, even a short acquaintance with these modern-seeming cities indicates they are not Western nor, indeed, in any Western sense, modern [...] Another indication of the difference occurs when Western visitors attempt to locate an address. Their assumptions are that a city is planned, that there is a logic to be discerned in its structure. Empty-cored Tokyo, however, initially exhibits nothing of the sort." There are complex historical reasons for this, which are summed up in a basic cultural difference: "As elsewhere in Japan, the civic concern which Westerners are accustomed to in their own cities, the assumption that a private address is a public matter, seems to be missing." See Donald Ritchie (1999) *Tokyo*, London: 13-14.

<sup>12</sup> The famous map of London Underground, designed by Underground engineer Harry Beck in 1933, is exceptional in this regard, as being easily recalled in memory, but also in the way that it does not correspond to the actual geography of the city it 'represents.'

<sup>13</sup> See Norton E. Long (1958) 'The Local Community as an Ecology of Games,' *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 64 (3): 251-261.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, John May (1966) *Living In Cities*, London: "The first car appeared in Britain as early as 1888, and by the outbreak of the First World War there were about a quarter of a million motor vehicles on the roads of Britain. In 1964, the number was over twelve and one-quarter millions" (19) The need for greater organization prompted the well-known Buchanan Report which saw traffic management in terms of the accommodation of the emerging urban chaos by "improving signal installations, eliminating right-hand turns, instituting one-way systems, clearing the streets of parked cars, improving signs... to improve the flow of traffic." That is, by refining principles of



challenge to the desire for urban harmony, and hence the city planner re-emerges as technocrat, or even, as the 'scientist' of imaginations. Such elite social architects pursued a vision that incorporated as a necessary element of the enterprise the fashioning of human minds. This was the planner as 'value technician,' expressed as such in the patrician tones of one who knows that a lack of order in movement can have a debilitating effect on the maintenance of the body politic:

As scientists, or technicians, we work with facts to arrive at truth, using methods and language appropriate to our tasks, and our way of handling problems are not subject to outsiders' criticisms.<sup>15</sup>

Appropriately, the minds of the many were thought capable of attaining a harmony bequeathed by this elite; rather than it emanating from, as in ancient times, man's communion with nature.

### *Forgetting, Strategic and Reckless*

Yet, the most important aspect of the finite nature of such rationalism is the collective mind that, in a demonstration of hope, attempts to realize it. Once again, if we zoom from our objective perspective further into our hypothetical urban landscape we see, perhaps, a seething mass of bodies in motion, social 'atoms' meeting and parting. If we penetrate this yet further the 'atoms' become conscious, and the consciousness of each individual remains we see – despite the lines and grids that 'move' the physical individual – infinite; there is no knowing, ultimately, the intentions that compel movement.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless the objective order is undoubtedly assimilated in the sense that the body can only move within the spatial environment that it finds itself in. If one does get lost, the straight lines of a highway, to take one example, offer the comfort that someone else has been there before, and that the logic of planning being relatively constant, there

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organization. Colin Buchanan, author of the original report, quoted in Elderedge (1967) *Taming Megalopolis*. New York: 379

<sup>15</sup> Thomas A. Reiner (1967) 'The Planner as Value Technician' in Elderedge (ed.) *ibid*: 232.

<sup>16</sup> That is to say, establishing objective 'causes' of action requires such a delimitation of the subject, conveyed with a meticulous care for the use of language that ultimately we can end up talking about the structure of sentences. So, in terms of explanation, Cartesian Dualism persists, although Donald Davidson for one, tries to meet the requirements of both by introducing a notion of 'anomalous monism' – that is the idea that mind and body are related in action and movement, but not in any way that can be generalized in terms of scientific laws, and this he argues does not contradict Humean causation, which, he suggests, pertains only to conjunctions individuated. See Davidson (1980) *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford.



will be some kind of similarity to other rational environments you may have become used to. This is what Benjamin refers to when he speaks of the difficulty of experiencing surprise in the city: the difficulty is in *forgetting* when the concrete facts (streets, signs, places) are presented with seeming immediacy, almost without barrier and as a reflection of the internal consciousness. So the reasonableness of the physical geography of urban society depends on a subjective identification with it, on adherence to the 'facts.' The city *is* 'us.' We are the city – at least this is the case in most of the West.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, we have the city as a living, breathing, moving entity that is constantly overcoming this, not to say producing, within the harmony, the seeds of conflict. In the hustle and bustle of ceaseless traffic, itself an immanent threat to stability, knowledge becomes the attention paid to particulars, like parking your car between the white lines, which is to say, knowledge becomes very general and abstract. Where gaps in knowledge are apparent, because for instance movement is too rapid to be contained within bounds of expectation (or 'normality'), so too is the contingency of social existence. Within the city therefore, is concealed a subjectivity that can propel itself forward on this lack of real knowledge.

A gambler, in moving in a way that looks objectively aimless (in that his motion removes long-term goals) is engaged in acts of abandonment and forgetting. In Auster's *The Music of Chance*, there is little inclination on the part of Nashe and Pozzi, the two gamblers, to rely on knowledge, on the kind of reasonableness that demands caution by its very nature. The consequence for them has the whiff of morality about it. Both having demonstrated a reluctance to impose an order on their own lives, it is done for them by the victorious Flower and Stone. Like Hobbes' sovereign, Flower and Stone become the 'authors' of Nashe and Pozzi's actions. If Nashe and Pozzi were in aimless flight prior to the fateful poker game, what resulted from their gambling was the restoration of a kind of organization, a grounding in reality. For once they are forced to give in to time, and also to another bully, the budget.<sup>18</sup> Here, Flower and Stone are the 'value technicians,' and Stone more precisely a contemporary version of the Hobbesian sovereign, the great 'architect,' who builds not only a city, but refashions the minds of men who give in to subjective impulses arising from too much disordered activity.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Georg Simmel (1971) 'The Metropolis and Mental Life,' *On Individual and Social Forms*, Chicago.



It is an inescapable fact that we can remain convinced of our power to control life only by relying on our previous experience of certain phenomena being brought into relation with each other. This is to identify, to delimit and therefore objectify reality. The constant conjunction of phenomena, and the emergence of beliefs regarding the causal relations of existence, allows a certain degree of confidence in the future. This is undeniable. Yet, it also seems that the objectification of a world so understood realizes some kind of psychological dependency, particularly in the sense that the more we have controlled our world, the more we seem to rely on the elimination of the contingent.

As a result of a habitual forgetting that provides the ground of modern social life, and which in modernity has actually become almost a demand in virtue of the specialization of all departments of knowledge, what is *known* then takes the form of a number of ontological assumptions. That is to say, knowledge amounts to a kind of faith in causal relations that takes for granted that certain things are outside our control, and that things are just the way they are because our common experience convinces us that we may be able to *trust* in others who have assumed control over various parts of our lives in modern society – and the list here would extend from the bus driver to the organisations who produce our food to the people we elect to operate the government of the society we live in.<sup>19</sup> The existence of a hidden ‘network’ of trust suggests that we come through a process of acquaintance or learning to act in a habitual manner, in ways that reveal our internalization of an entire range of rational expectations and values. As a result of the ‘strategic’ forgetting of the extent to which our lives depend on others, action at times becomes a more or less automatic activity, and as far as certain types of rectilinear motion are concerned we do not even need to think.

Once again, in thinking of urban organization, the regulation of traffic flow is one example of the need for decision making having been substantially limited in modern experience. Under the automated control of traffic one may often follow the flow of

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<sup>18</sup> See Frederick and Steven Barthelme (2000) *Double Down*, Boston and New York. The authors speak of winning as “a victory over money, the tyrant that has been pushing you around your whole life” (91). Budgetary constraints also figure as a structural determinant of gambling in Edward Devereux (1980) *ibid*, chapter 19.

<sup>19</sup> Some notion of trust would seem to be employed in the earliest of the social contract tradition, in forming the basis of what we would call these days ‘constitutional government.’ John Locke, for example, took trust to be “the bond of society.” See John Locke (1993) *Political Writings*, Harmondsworth: 182, and section 142 of the *Second Treatise of Government* (any edition). And on the social contract tradition, see for example, the selections by Hume, Rousseau, and Locke in Ernest Barker (ed.) (1969) *The Social Contract*, Oxford. With relevance to the contingency of modern social relations, and the consideration of trust as the ‘collection of hidden principles’ that make ‘good and prosperous societies,’ see Francis Fukuyama (1995) *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. New York.



movement rather than the signal for movement.<sup>20</sup> If we take the motor vehicle as the pre-eminent encapsulation of the modern freedom to move, and as the statement of a desire for transcendence, we can see this to some extent, insofar as motion and rest always are made possible through a particularly delimited aspect of the urban geography. A road is not simply a line, but it is lines within lines, and these may cut through imagination as much as they do the physical terrain. In popular imagination the road objectifies the possibility of alterity ('Hit the road' being a particularly common injunction to draw a line under experience). But what usually goes without mention, but is unwittingly expressed at all times, is that the road is merely a vehicle for experience. This sleeping belief is often expressed, rather, in terms of a desire to have the freedom to move, to do, and to be. So, the line-as-road permits transcendence, but the finer it becomes, this line, the more it actually becomes constricting. It can compel, with legal sanction, uniformity. Thus, as a vehicle for motion we have either the crude line, anything from dirt tracks to highways, lines upon which your view may extend far into the distance; or, providing a finer vehicle for movement, lines such as those seen at road intersections or parking lots, lines which box you in. Attaining a temporary state of rest – in this case that would be to park a car – is only possible by utilizing these routes, only by stopping many times at traffic signals, obeying directional signs, and finally parking the vehicle within the lines provided. Once again if we consider this in the broadest terms, in terms of the spatial orientation of the subject, the emblems of such a rational organization as the flow of traffic depends on, help us to construct subsequent expectations of regularity in phenomena.<sup>21</sup>

Forgetting, as a crucial aspect of psychological orientation, requires – under certain conditions – regularity and orderliness (although we need recall nothing of this after a time), to the extent that we build systems around compartmentalized 'knowledge.'<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For example, most people step onto a plane without pondering on the physics of flight. We drive our cars at great speeds in the knowledge that most drivers pay similar attention to the need for safety.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Peter Conrad (1999) *Modern Times, Modern Places*, London. Here is a description of traffic at Potsdamer Platz in 1905, almost 20 years before the introduction of the traffic first signal in Europe in the same place: "A Berlin newspaper had kept a vigil in Potsdamer Platz, and in a single hour counted 416 streetcars, 146 buses, 564 carriages, 538 assorted unclassifiable vehicles, 54 coaches and 138 tricycles battling across it: entropy in action" (62) And in terms of the disorientating effects of our faith in social and geographical order, we need only note the ease with which the merest alteration to the established organization can produce unpredictable results. The Observer, Feb. 18<sup>th</sup> 2001 reported that, "Vandals caused traffic chaos in Totland, Isle of Wight, after they left eight road signs pointing the wrong way."

<sup>22</sup> 'Driving,' 'motoring,' and 'traffic' signify different levels of forgetting, and variations in knowledge: the early freedom of movement found in the car would have been a qualitatively different experience under conditions where traffic was unregulated compared with what we know today. Driving one of the first cars would have had more in common with driving a horse and cart than driving a modern car. For insightful comments on the role of forgetting



This is true of intellectual as well as of physical systems; as much a feature of cultures and ideologies as well, but particularly so in the history of science and technology. The historical development of specialization in the sciences was part of an attempt to more efficiently conquer nature, which is to say it is an attempt to rule out uncertainty. Again, zooming in to our hypothetical urban landscape from an objective position we see the difficulties in maintaining this level of expectancy in a living environment: we see, for instance, ‘irrational’, inconsistent motion, most often manifested in behaviour that is irregular in some way, and we see this because the city, whilst providing an organization of expectations, also, and as a consequence, throws a light on anomalous phenomena. Thus, we see social problems. We see criminal activity. This too is chance. And though we try to control it, it demands ever more cunning devices. It is interesting that a manufacturer of contemporary security products, based in Brazil, markets an anti-theft scanning device, an item we are all used to seeing situated at shop doorways, as *The Aleatoric Raffle Detector*. This device (Plate 5) is designed to inhibit the movement of ‘aleatoric people.’<sup>23</sup>

Taking an objective, or scientific, view therefore will downplay these things as ‘irregularities,’ because such an approach gets caught up in a high degree of abstraction. We see in objective terms only what happens for the most part, and so the irrational, the criminal, and the deviant are simply exceptional (become so) from the point of view of the definition of the normal, which of course, like all objectification is rendered in tautological terms. It is past. The objective position, which, by understanding social existence in terms of order, ignores subjective capacities.<sup>24</sup>

Hobbes understood (in his justification of sovereign power) that such an objectification is not necessarily tyrannical, and to so characterize it would be to misstate the basis of rational autonomy, which we understand in an awareness that the social order subsists in virtue of an acceptance of limits on personal freedom, for the sake of a

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in self-creation, see Nietzsche’s essay ‘On the Utility and Liability of History for Life’ (1995) in *Unfashionable Observations, Volume 2*. Stanford: 83-168.

<sup>23</sup> Of course, when a criminal is reformed he goes ‘straight,’ or tries to stick to the ‘straight and narrow.’

<sup>24</sup> The ‘is’ of identity may not always be clear. In terms of existential statements a ‘stative’ verb may express a bodily or mental state, as opposed to an action or movement. The ‘durative’ form of a verb would express continuous movement. This is really tangential to the point made, but is explored for example in Charles H. Kahn (1986) ‘Retrospective on the Verb *to be* and the Concept of Being’, and in David Wiggins (1980) *Sameness and Substance*, Oxford. The point is generally related to asking *what* something like the wager is, rather than say, why people gamble, which is the more commonly asked question, and one that restricts it to looking at formal elements, it seems. So, the ‘what is it’ question draws our attention to metaphysical difficulties.



# Nossos Produtos

Sorteio Aleatorio



O detector por Sorteio Aleatório é utilizado em indústrias, portarias, estacionamentos, mercados, etc.... O aparelho detecta pessoas aleatoriamente que poderão ser revistadas, inibindo a ação de furtos, o transporte de armas, ou outros, dependendo de sua utilização.

PLATE 5. SORTEIO ALEATORIO. Magnetic Co., 1999. In English: 'The Aleatory Raffle Detector.' This is a product similar to numerous others positioned at the exit points of retail outlets the world over, and marketed by a Brazilian security firm. Rather interestingly we note the injunction to sort out the random. The caption reads, "The Aleatory Raffle detector is used in industries, entrances, parking, markets, etc... The equipment detects *aleatoric people* who can be inspected, inhibiting thefts, weapon transportation, or other, depending on its use" (emphasis mine). This, as far as I am aware, is the first instance of such individuals being designated by the appropriately improvisational-sounding adjective 'aleatoric' — appropriate because thieves, we may suppose, tend to make things, make life, up as they go. (Source: <http://www.magnetic.com.br>)



shared need for certainty in some things, particularly physical safety and material well-being. And so, most people stick to the 'straight and narrow' in terms of conforming to the rational imperatives of having well defined goals; they pay their taxes and invest in pensions. They act with *a stealth* of interest. Thus, rational autonomy when seen objectively might be taken to represent a relatively harmonious social situation. And there is, as the Ancient Greeks understood in their notion of the polis, a coming together of interests in the city. However, this is understood as an expectation based on the relation of one person to another, and of these to the whole. The point is that we may forget this, but it is there beneath our feet – the physical organization of the city represents an attempt at this ideal harmonious state.

For example, if we visualize a particular instance of a physical longing for stability, we will see something like that seen in Ed Ruscha's aerial photographs of Los Angeles parking lots (Plate 6). Once again, it is hopefully not straining the point to suggest that such an organization is illustrative of an at least formal rhythm, if not harmony, in social existence.<sup>25</sup> That is to say, it produces in one form the general regularity in modern society's spatial organization of experience, or again, it is evidence that we properly act on the basis of expectations; it suggests a unity of sorts. Whilst this refers to empty spaces (in respect of Ruscha's images), it is interesting to see what happens when these are filled up. Objectifications of motion in such spaces, for example, in speeded up film of city traffic, allow us observe the realization of this loosely defined rhythm: the ebb and flow of bodies and motor vehicles at points of momentary rest such a traffic signals fluctuate to the orchestrations of an unseen conductor. Phenomena thus viewed, and taken as a whole, merely reinforce the impression of a 'social singularity' of movement that conforms to some unheard rhythm, and reveals that for some of the time we unconsciously move, not freely, but as 'passengers' taken up by the vehicle of the city. In some variants this takes on the mark of authority:

WALK (Go)

DON'T WALK (Stop)

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<sup>25</sup> Is rhythm a precondition of harmony? No. Nor does rhythm correspond to harmony. Maybe *I am* straining to make the point here, but what I am suggesting is that there is realized in these social forms a unity of purpose.



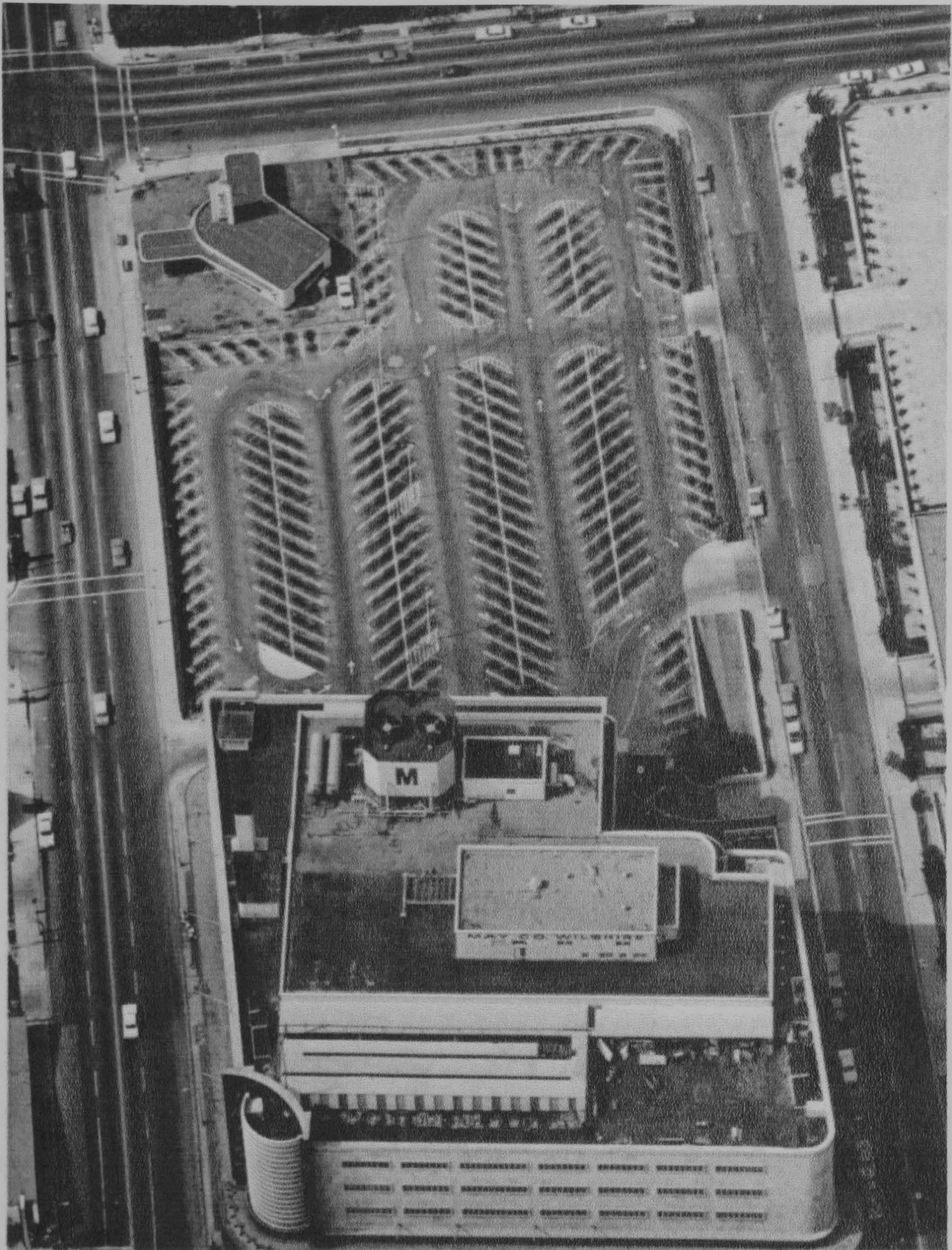


PLATE 6. MAY COMPANY, 6067 WILSHIRE BLVD. Ed Ruscha, 1967. Here we see an example of the city as 'vehicle.' From the less obviously regulated darts of the freeway — which carry motorists within what Reyner Banham in *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (London, Allen Lane: 1971) calls the *autopia*: "the freeway system in its totality is now a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life, the fourth ecology of the Angeleno" (213) — to the more finely arranged lines of the grid of the car park, where automobiles are symmetrically sorted. See Edward Ruscha, *Thirty-four Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (Np, Los Angeles: 1967).



Hobbes would surely have been impressed.<sup>26</sup>

Gambling, and by this I mean ultimately the wager, differs significantly from these objective varieties of motion and rest. On the face of it the wager emerges, like any other demonstration of subjective will, from the background of such a day-to-day reality. But more interestingly, it is against this 'normalized' causal process that we can distinguish the radical nature of the phenomenal world as encountered by the gambler, and suggest that what makes gambling unique is that it destroys the Hobbesian ideal of motion. In the city things may or may not be relatively stable, but in actuality the mind of the individual changes with greater ease than the physical geography. The gambler thus moves out of a 'sphere' of habitual causal awareness, itself a selective amnesia, and becomes an exemplar of this, propelled by an act of subjective will into a liminal state in pursuit of some ill-defined otherness.<sup>27</sup>

That is not to say all expectations, that all causal powers are lost. Certainly events are constantly conjoined when brought into relation in gambling, but such regularities refer only to formal attributes of the situation, as in the rules of a particular game. Thus, if you possess a Royal Flush you win, or if you hold the six numbers drawn in a lottery you win the jackpot, and so on. The game, with its set of rules and expectations is just another vehicle for motion, at a more detailed level of action – which is to say the wager releases the subject and the rules and conventions of the game are transformed into a world of absolute freedom. In this broad sense the city is a game, as is society. They are formal and rule-bound.

However, the lack of constancy in the gambling *experience* is uniquely a feature of the wager – and strictly speaking not of the game – and one that designates each instance, each plunge, as a discrete feature of a gambler's experience; the profane corollary of spiritual submission. The game is object, it remains stable and therefore it is simply the vehicle for play and all that entails.

### *Causal Anomalies*

It is frequently noted that gambling breeds a variety of superstitions, all of which would seem to rest on the imperceptible nature of causes in such unknown, or unknowable

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<sup>26</sup> In the United States, jaywalking, the willful disregard of such means of organizing movement is punishable in law. These jaywalkers, we might say, are also 'aleatoric people' (see also plate 5, below).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Victor Turner (1977) *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Ithaca: Chapter three.



territory.<sup>28</sup> This should be no surprise. An inability to bring events into relation through the singular experience produces good grounds for imputing unlikely causal powers in phenomena, or with even, it seems, with regard to the power of people to upset the ‘natural’ order of things.

Take Paul Auster’s *Nashe*; whilst his proxy, Jack Pozzi, continues to play cards he retreats from the game and steals a model figure from the ‘City of the World.’ Later Pozzi becomes convinced that they were cursed from that point onwards, as it coincided with the start of the losing streak that sealed their fate. Hindsight provided the realization of the cause of that failure. “We’d come to the point where everything was turning into music for us, and then you have to go upstairs and smash all the instruments,” he says. “You tampered with the universe, my friend, and once a man does that, he’s got to pay the price.”<sup>29</sup>

This is, of course, an outrageous conflation of separate events; the superstitious mind is struggling to explain the unexplainable, that is, chance. But just as the objective view of the city reveals a certain kind of regularity, a causal determinateness, that particular objectivity is, like the superstitious conflation of cause and effect, not at all what is going on at the ‘quantum’ level of subjectivity.

If we focus on the fact that such discrete events, as realized in superstitious beliefs, do not conform to ‘reality’ we miss an important point. And, for example, a ‘scientific’ view of gambling, as offered by probabilistic reasoning, is not really about the *what* of gambling, but seems, on the contrary, to be concerned with bringing to the fore an objective means of ‘correcting’ faulty gambling beliefs to our attention. It has absolutely nothing to say about the subjectivity of the gambler, which is manifold in the way it resists objectification. And insofar as we speak about the experience of the *wager* there is no room here for probability. Probability enumerates a concrete reality, this is not denied, but in creating an object it ‘destroys’ an essence. The wager, as the essence, is the possibility of an alternative reality, and that is the difference: probability is, by contrast, built upon the formal properties of the game, on quantifiable and variable ‘facts.’

There is no science of chance that can make sense of the profound singularity of the wager. A probabilistic ‘mapping’ of chance rests on an ever more infinite series of plays. In other words, we might expect a genuine gambler to abandon any Hobbesian hopes of

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<sup>28</sup> For a summary see Gerda Reith (1999) *The Age of Chance: Gambling in Western Culture*, London: 6-9.



certainty, of the mastery of future, or of conjuring a previous conjunction of events within the limitation of an experience as singular as the wager. With the wager we are reminded of the precarious social relations that society rests upon. The wager is, in fact, ludicrous. It deflates rationality with a sharp guffaw. The interesting thing is that this can be scary enough to prompt the erection of defences. Bataille, for instance, observed that chance never really disappears, but the illusion we are usually left with that would point to the contrary arises purely as a result of the act of calculating itself, an act which is nothing else but the exclusion of the contingent. It is, in other words, to forget. This, as we have seen, is such a defence.<sup>30</sup>

Play, in all its forms, realises a 'non-rational' motion. It is a movement which is repetition rather than rectilinear or developmental, which is to say we cannot grasp this in terms of causes or ends. This motion becomes attractive to many participants, not least the figure of the gambler, because of its associations with chance. It is at once recognition of the attractiveness of uncertainty, and perhaps, implicitly, a denial of the objective organization of the world, in every sense; temporal, spatial and psychological.<sup>31</sup> A glimpse of an accelerated physical causality is afforded by gambling activity, and the more significant the wager, the greater the challenge to the individual willing to test his own mortal powers against chance. In an unguarded moment of arrogance Dostoevsky wrote to his wife that, in gambling, he had on numerous occasions:

Observed as I approached the gambling table that if one plays coolly, calmly and with calculation, *it is quite impossible to lose!* I swear – it is an absolute impossibility! It is blind chance pitted against my calculation; hence I have an advantage over it.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Auster (1991) *The Music of Chance*, London: 138.

<sup>30</sup> See Georges Bataille (1997) the essay on 'Chance' in *The Bataille Reader*, Oxford: "The human mind is set up to take no account of chance, except insofar as the calculations that eliminate chance allow you to forget it; that is, *not take it into account*. But going as far as possible, reflection on chance strips the world bare of the entirety of predictions in which reason encloses it. Like human nakedness, the nakedness of chance – which in the last resort is definitive – is obscene and disgusting: in short divine. Since the course of things of the world hangs on chance, this course is as depressing for us as a King's absolute power" (39).

<sup>31</sup> There have always been exceptions to this ordering of space. Indeed, the science of probability first came to terms with spatial contingencies when it became increasingly important to move valuable goods over unmapped or uncharted territory – this gave birth to the so-called 'aleatory contract,' which was the exchange of a present and certain value for a future, uncertain one. See Gerd Gigerenzer, *et al* (1989) *The Empire of Chance*, Oxford.

<sup>32</sup> He ended this letter, however, by stating that he could "never maintain my coolness and detachment in gambling *for longer than half an hour at a time ...*" This letter was written after many previous experiences had disproved his belief in the fallibility of chance (a letter to Anna, his wife, dated May 22, 1867) See Frank, Joseph and Goldstein, David I. (eds.) *Selected Letters of Fyodor Dostoevsky* (1987): 245. Similar faith in self-control can be seen arising from Marcel Duchamp's short-lived involvement with gambling. In 1924 he began "experimenting with roulette and *trente-et-quarante* at the casino, trying out various systems." Thinking that he could do this quite objectively, and without succumbing to the temptations of the wager, he described in more detail his attempts to work out a "martingale," or system, for winning at roulette. He had been winning regularly, he said, and he thought



Not only is this a stunning demonstration of a misunderstanding of the limits of causal reasoning within the context of the wager, it is a fine example of how far human foolishness can extend itself. It is also a commonplace amongst gamblers, this conviction of infallibility. Yet the reasons for extending hope beyond reason in such an optimistic manner may serve to mitigate some of the Dostoevsky's *hubris*, and may incline us to suggest that one of the factors at work in such a misapprehension of power and causation lies with the confining logic of reason itself. Perhaps the faith we extend to slow and careful motion misleads us as to the extent of our own powers, unknowingly baffles us, leaving us blind to the essential contingency of life.

A gambling game, whatever form it may take (and it can be as little as an agreement between two people to wager on an uncertain future event), is therefore as likely to be the means for expressing a controlled calculation as it is for permitting the wager. But the wager makes a fool of anyone, and that again is why it is so ludicrous. We can put it another way. A movement by stealth is a movement that has in mind the future. It is an accumulation of interest, both in the financial sense that gave us the idea of compound interest, and in the more general sense that it requires a great deal of conscious effort, an intensity of interest, in fact.

Gambling cannot approximate to such a deliberate and calculated motion because of the simple fact that the essence of a particular instance of a game is a metaphysical re-ordering of all notions of subject and object. In the wager such a distinction falls from the player like a second, unnecessary, skin. All becomes one. The discreteness of experience in high-tension play particularly, renders such an intensity of interest, as is required to take a rational approach, useless. Gambling denies the past. It negates the accumulated knowledge of causes, in order to constantly take up the present again and again, forcing it into confrontation with the future.

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he had found a successful pattern. "My statistics give me full confidence," he said. "I am going to play there in this frame of mind: a mechanized mind against a machine. Nothing romantic in the venture, or luck." Duchamp sold bonds in this venture to interested investors. The *Monte Carlo Bond* as it was known, was ended by a combination of boredom at the effort involved in a system based on repeated play, and the diminishing financial returns of this method. All that remains are the bond certificates, which consist of a Man Ray photo of Duchamp's head imposed on a roulette table, with the pun *moustiques domestiques demistock*, printed repeatedly. See Calvin Tomkins (1998) *Duchamp: A Biography*, New York: 253-67.



### 3 Between Belief and Hope

Men [...] being frequently driven into straits where rules are useless, and being often kept fluctuating pitiably [...] by the uncertainty of fortune's greedily coveted favours, they are consequently, for the most part, very prone to credulity.

BARUCH SPINOZA, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

What is hope but a wish for some state of affairs that may realise our desires and intentions – whether or not we can actually bring them about is another matter.<sup>1</sup> Hope perhaps reaches as well to something beyond what is habitually delivered as a matter of *routine*?<sup>2</sup> To have faith in an alternative state of affairs is to hold out some hope that the normal course of causal relations terminates not in what is usual, but instead breaks free of the determination of a constant repetition of events, breaching the more or less recurrent motion of everyday life. The possibility of transformation can only be anticipated by hope – certainly this is a partial vision of what lies ahead. Nor does it amount to a belief, which in terms of modernity becomes a manifestation of degrees of certainty, rather than an earlier form of belief as a bearing witness to some divine revelation. Beliefs are substantiated by ‘facts’; they are solid, capable of being ‘grasped,’ whilst, by contrast, hopes are *barely* within grasp. The uncertainty the gambler finds in the wager realises one form of hope through a specific event.

There is a liquidation of reason in this notion of hope – barely resting on what is likely, never mind on *fact*. Hope can dissipate into nothing just as easily as it is constituted in the body of some knowledge. At such a point in experience, when hopes

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ernest Bloch (1995) *The Principle of Hope*, 2 Vols. Cambridge, MA.

<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard suggested that our obligations to others realise an oppressive routine that becomes solidified as *the customary*, what he refers to as a “deadly continuity.” This is not so, however, because of its predictability, but rather because it removes the subjective capacity for what he calls *rotation*. Instead, custom moves us by an external force – “custom is like the wind and weather, something completely indeterminable.” Søren Kierkegaard (1987) ‘Rotation of Crops’ in *Either/Or, Part 1*. Princeton: 281-300.



are up in the air, suspended between realization and dissipation, hope actually stalls motion; the anxiety produced by this *inbetweenness* signifies that a liminal state has been reached. A Maybe. To venture toward the future as in gambling is both an act of abandonment and of forgetting, but it is a consciously taken step; leaving behind and ignoring what one knows do not merely happen. The future is willed in doing so. So, the suspense encapsulated by the wager is neither resignation (giving up) nor negation (denial). It is, rather, an affirmation of the present – a Perhaps.

In the wager the gambler invites movement to take over. There occurs a removal of psychological barriers (and other defences) that normally direct movement, and this is what makes the gambling experience so unique and also what makes it so compelling against all objective knowledge that the net effect of a continuation of gambling is simply loss. Gambling, then, travels between belief and hope, and in some of the best-known descriptions of this *to-ing* and *fro-ing* we see also a high degree of anxiety – a fear of where the unfolding present may take one. Belief is left behind in the wager for the sake of realizing an uncertain moment. The abandonment of reason, and of routine, is thus essential in order to venture beyond habit and is, as a matter of necessity, demanded by the situation, which is to say that the past can have no influence on an encounter with chance, none beyond propelling motion forward.

The wager unfolds as the anticipation of an unknown future, a calling forth of some indefinable, yet curiously eternal or universal all-consuming power that moves life forward. This is reflected in that ancient practice of dicing; at times dice would be thrown to divine the will of the gods. In coming to rest the dice would reveal the allocation of justice whilst affirming a cosmological mysteriousness.<sup>3</sup>

By the seventeenth century, however, the meting out of justice by these methods was largely extinct in the modern world. It was first Blaise Pascal who gave birth to a new understanding of chance, and although this was not yet equivalent to modern conceptions of chance (as his well-known wager ponders on the enigma of God's

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<sup>3</sup> Eventually, modern judicial processes inaugurated a course of legal proceedings carried out in accordance with well-defined rules and principles. Nevertheless, invoking chance has been noted amongst those in positions of legal authority. In his history of gambling in the United States, *Play the Devil*, New York, Henry Chafetz (1962) tells of one particularly unconventional judge: "White-whiskered Judge Campbell owned a saloon on Main Street in Benicia, California, during the 1880's, and he officially administered justice over the bar, consulting the dice before imposing penalties on transgressors. If a three and a two showed up, the offender served five days or five months, depending on His Honour's mood. He seldom jailed his best customers, though he was capable of handing out stiff sentences. When a well-known character was hauled up before him [...] Campbell shook the dice without waiting to hear either



existence), it nonetheless moves beyond the ancient practice of invoking of some divine will to propose a basis for decision-making when reason fails; it suggests that any motion to the future – even a pondering of the future – provokes an inflation of contingency. As Ian Hacking said, a decision is required because, “a game is on at the other end of an infinite distance, and heads or tails is going to turn up. Which way will you bet?”<sup>4</sup> The wager, of course, remains unresolved, and the mystery thereafter substantiated, according to Pascal, in terms of a simple choice, and logic dictates that to wager that God exists dominates the alternative wager of his non-existence. In hypothetical terms, then, the wager may continue to instantiate such a metaphysical insurance policy without resolution, but practically, gambling affords a means of seeing a limited resolution of play. This may be temporary, but it separates the practical from the metaphysical.<sup>5</sup>

The uncertainty of play can be anticipated, and may be apparent prior to the wager; although this can be partially resolved in the sense that reason comes to comprehend the form of the wager (that is to say, the rules of the game). The game itself prompts a need to understand something unknown, and can be itself, enigmatic. An obscure and detailed incomprehension comes over the uninitiated; a “Chinese puzzle,” as Dostoevsky’s Alexei recalled after his first visit to the roulette tables.

It is important to see then that the incomprehensibility of the wager lies in the fact that the apparent puzzle of the situation is not overcome by mere knowledge of the rules of a game. In fact, the game provides only formal conditions for the wager. That is to say, in wagering games are of secondary importance, in that they may vary and so the wager – being the consummation of the play, its essence – is what always remains the same. It is universally the affirmation of the contingent that is realized *through* gambling *in the wager*. And given the distinct nature of the individual wager, this must remain so: whatever events have preceded the present wager have no direct bearing on the

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complaint or defense. ‘Here you are again, Padie McAlony,’ he said, ‘lazy, lousy, and shiftless; with no more destination than a balloon in midair, and less visible means of support. Take a six spot on the house’’: 140.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Hacking (1975) *The Emergence of Probability*, Cambridge: 66-67.

<sup>5</sup> If Pascal was trying to illustrate the point that faith is not attainable through deliberation this would have been equally reflected in a pre-Reformation view of gambling as relatively harmonious with the Church. Peter Fuller noted that: “Catholic and pre-Reformation Church of England divines frequently emphasized the structure and symbolism of gambling as being a metaphorical equivalent of the Christian hierarchy. Cards, in particular, presented a ready-made simile for the Great Chain of Being; the gambler’s attitude to those cards, with all its optimism, blind faith, irrational certitude, struggle and acceptance of arbitrary decisions, paralleled what the church considered to be a desirable attitude towards God, and his ordering of the universe.” See J. Halliday and P. Fuller (eds) *The Psychology of Gambling*, London: 60.



allotment of chance, and thus whatever patterns seem to have been thrown up in previous experience have no necessary effect on what will follow.<sup>6</sup> The laws of the universe, for all practical purposes, are annulled and renewed with each play.

### *Movement to Future Unfolding*

Attempts to meet gambling with reason are really a denial of the ineluctable force of chance, and more pathetically we might suggest, such attempts betray a denial of play, perhaps even an inability to play. For as soon as a gambler becomes caught up in trying to fashion the future according to some pre-ordained design he ceases gambling; instead he is engaged in work, just as surely as if he were clocking in at the office or the factory and saving to pay for the necessities of life.

In work we ‘hold on,’ consolidate. In gambling it is necessary to let go, to get ‘loose.’ The willful abandonment of orderly paths, of modes of thinking that ease day-to-day activity, is therefore an affront to the values of modern society. This can be seen in the shock that wayward tendencies in motion provoke, illustrating, as they do, an ill discipline of nature if not outright dissolution – every social category that is described in the language of otherness moves in a different step relative to some idea of the normal; hobos, gypsies, ‘dropouts’ of various kinds, and in short, everything that comes to be identified as the *foreign*.<sup>7</sup>

In Dostoevsky’s *The Gambler* Alexei clearly realizes a relationship of concordance between gambling and movement, with the latter, in the person of the gambler, as the summation of a characteristically disordered code for living. He is, in other words, conscious of its shock value; of being seen as an unstable character. In one memorable scene we see Alexei remonstrating with two of his social superiors, as he ostentatiously flouts the values of capital accumulation they hold so dear – by announcing that “as a Russian” he is not only incapable of such a detailed interest in the future as this would require, but is, indeed, inclined towards a contrary wastefulness that is actually the denial of stability and normality:

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<sup>6</sup> This is not, however, to deny that a wager prior in experience influences a decision to gamble again, only to say that no gambling experience will usually conform to the conditions of statistical probability.

<sup>7</sup> On the notion of the foreign to our sense of social and personal value see Julia Kristeva (1991) *Strangers to Ourselves*. Trans. L. Roudiez, New York.



“It still remains to be seen which is more repulsive — Russian haphazardness or German accumulation of wealth through honest labor.” Alexei says.

“What a monstrous thought!” the General cried.

“How very Russian!” The Frenchman exclaimed.

To which Alexei responded by a further shock-provoking outburst. “I’d rather spend my life like a nomad under a tent than worship the German idol.”<sup>8</sup>

And it is as a modern day nomad that we first encounter Nashe in Paul Auster’s *The Music of Chance* – a man constantly moving to an unknown destination, with a car as both the closest thing he has to fixed property, and as also the carriage of all his hopes as he proceeds on a never-ending coast-to-coast road trip across America. We are introduced to Jim Nashe as he leaves his family, with ostensibly a goal in mind, we understand, as he plans to travel to Massachusetts, although:

As it happened, he soon found himself traveling in the opposite direction. That was because he missed a ramp to the freeway – a common enough mistake – but instead of driving the extra twenty miles that would have put him back on course, he impulsively went up the next ramp, knowing full well that he had just committed himself to the wrong road. It was a sudden unpremeditated decision, but in the brief time that elapsed between the two ramps, Nashe understood that there was no difference, that both ramps were finally the same.<sup>9</sup>

Such a removal of expectations can only become apparent through motion, in that any human movement beyond fixed routine being consciously chosen invites chance along.

In recollections of gamblers, the leaving behind of the past can always be contrasted by the radical difference it can realize. Gambling, as a mode of being, thus moves far beyond the confines of a game, and may actually come to represent a constant wagering of the self. So, we see in Jack Richardson’s *Memoir of a Gambler*, our optimistic ‘chancer’ sharing a police cell with a transvestite a short while after taking flight from the woman who loves him for, instead, a life as a gambler.<sup>10</sup> Before embarking on his journey he remembers sitting beside his lover, unable to continue within the confines of routine, with his stable, yet unrewarding, life as a writer as the stake in a larger game:

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<sup>8</sup> In Fyodor Dostoevsky (1980) *The Gambler*, New York: 43. The General only gambles in order to appear wealthy, to save face – an important aspect to games where the social reception of one’s acts overtakes their subjective importance. Erving Goffman (1972) discusses saving face in ‘Where the Action Is,’ *Interaction Ritual*, London.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Auster (1991) *The Music of Chance*, London: 6.

<sup>10</sup> Jack Richardson (1979) *Memoir of a Gambler*, New York: 24.



I admitted that all the chaos I was going into frightened me and that I might someday grow numb even to the pleasures of gambling. I was heading west in the morning simply to prove that the peace surrounding me was not my final fate.<sup>11</sup>

And in another recollection, Frederick Barthelme's distaste for the normal settled life is seen in "never unpacking boxes" – the boxes that contained his life, forever portable and an emblem of his inability to be at 'home.' It is clear that if certainty is found in the warmth and security of familiarity, we can see that the nomadic tendencies of the gambler merely reflect an unending fascination with chance, and with the idea that the present must always be renewed. And so why make plans when the options tomorrow may be different?

In his essay on chance Georges Bataille characterises the contingency produced by gambling as a kind of extreme anguish. That is to say, as manifested in the subjective experience of the gambler, it becomes a mark of personal suffering – it is a physical ailment in the sense that it offers only a pain that is never more than temporarily eased. Chance is like an open wound upon the body of the gambler, which he seeks to close by overcoming chance. But in this choice of action the gambler misunderstands the nature of the pain, because this is a discomfort that cannot be removed by continuing to open the wound to see if it might have healed; the anguish may demand the repetition of play, but it is not resolved as a result. Chance, according to Bataille, can never come to rest, and the wager itself, which constantly seeks to resolve the anguish of one's vulnerability but fails because time and cause begin once again after the resolution of each wager; an effect that is never matched in subjective satisfaction or rest. It is instead the point of departure for a 're-beginning,' a movement to a destination unknown. Chance, Bataille said, demands that this end to movement never arrives, and the perfect way of attaining a concordance with chance is to keep moving.<sup>12</sup>

When gambling becomes a job, on the other hand, then the particular form of the game takes precedence over the wager, principally because an acquired skill at, say, poker will allow the player to put some limits on the outcome of the wager, or even to determine – to calculate – the most appropriate conditions for the wager: to play the

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<sup>11</sup> Richardson, *ibid*: 26.

<sup>12</sup> Georges Bataille (1997) 'Chance,' in *The Bataille Reader*, Oxford: 37-54.



probabilities (Plate 7).<sup>13</sup> “Card counting made playing seem like a job,” observe Frederick and Steven Barthelme, “like solid-waste management. We already had jobs, so it didn’t make sense to play blackjack that way.”<sup>14</sup> Because with work, like concerns with tomorrow in general, the future is mortgaged, and a ceiling is placed on hope, to the extent that hopes are met incrementally, stealthily, if at all.

The attraction of the wager is that it is an all-or-nothing experience, a singular, dizzying one-off affirmation of existence, full of dread and wonder – pursued for its capacity to astonish, yet also the source of this agonizing terror that produces dread. Should a player consider the odds against winning too great, or in other words if the fear of losing is taken as a reason to withhold from the play, then it is probable that the game is approached like a job, rather than gambling to be open to the forces of play. For in truth, to a gambler – as compared to simply a player of games – the odds do not really matter. Chance remains at all times the field of possibilities to the gambler, and this idea is not best encapsulated by this other idea of ‘the odds,’ which really presupposes a prior calculation having taken place. At the extremes of wagering there is no question of calculation; the odds don’t even arise as a matter for consideration when one moves beyond the mask of the game – beyond the perceptible, manageable, features of the game.<sup>15</sup> This is clear in the motivation of Jim Nashe in *The Music of Chance*, for example; leaving behind the past was a way of sweeping away the obligations of routine. It was for Nashe, the narrator remarks, “a dizzying prospect – to imagine all that freedom, to understand how little it mattered what choice he made.”<sup>16</sup>

There is an almost childish aspect to the defiance of reason in this restlessness. It is clear that within the evaluative context of a discourse of normality that the denial of strategies of calculation indicates that the gambler is ‘irrational’ or ‘superstitious.’ Even to imagine yourself immune to the consequences of your choices is a kind of madness, a conspicuous realignment of one’s orientation to reality. These charges, though perfectly reasonable, nevertheless founder on that basis. Reason misunderstands the profound ease with which the gambler colludes in stripping away his own power of willing. “I did not wish to be a mystic at the tables,” Jack Richardson says:

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<sup>13</sup> See *The Probability of a Gambler’s Ruin*, which presents an excellent illustration of the ‘mapping’ of chance.

<sup>14</sup> Frederick and Steven Barthelme (2000) *Double Down*, Boston and New York: 81.

<sup>15</sup> It is impossible to make a book to determine the likelihood of Pascal’s Wager; the more serious a wager then the less likely it will even be assimilable under ‘odds.’

<sup>16</sup> Paul Auster (1991) *The Music of Chance*, London: 6



Dropping chips at random as though the heavens owed me happy endings. However, I was also loath to become the victim of some involved mathematical system that tries, through binomial camouflage, to squirm around the fact that almost every bet in a casino carries odds against it.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless the gambler as the willful agent of his own destruction is viewed as the exception within the broader social acceptability of gambling. But the destructive capacity of the wager, as I have said, is never realised in petty gambling. If we fail to realize the negligibility of 'the odds' to what gambling really is, in other words, then misunderstanding follows also as a confusion over what happens under conditions of play – the calculative aspect of trying to control chance is ultimately contrary to play. To look at the surface, the games or the ways we can categorise the players, is the real misunderstanding of what is really going on under conditions of play, because play is about abandoning these categories.

Yet no matter how the memoirs of gamblers repeat this simple truth – that the only way to play the game is to allow oneself to be played – it does not alter a common confusion of the conditions of gambling with the workable situation so beloved of reason. Such wizened calculating machines as cardsharps, con men, and even the odd scientist have enjoyed using gambling as a workable situation. Even knowledge of the inherent uncertainty of gambling has failed to prevent some of the most spectacular attempts to tame chance. No, those dissolute and inveterate gamblers are simply 'chumps' we are led to believe by some who place their faith in reason; they just don't know how this chance thing really works, that's all.

To play the odds for profit, for example, one needs either a limitless supply of money (the 'bank' will always have more resources than the player), or a ready supply of the aforementioned 'chumps' as opponents; these would be characterised as players who play to lose, or who are perhaps untutored in the game, its potential scams.<sup>18</sup> But, as it turns out, things are not always what they seem: in an interesting recollection of a

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<sup>17</sup> Jack Richardson (1979) *Memoir of a Gambler*, New York: 30. Aside from memoirs, much of the gambling literature – specifically the academic literature – is devoted to the faulty reasoning of gamblers. These may be interesting from an academic point of view, but really only reinforce the pejorative employment of that particular description. From the gambler's point of view, to assess the wager according to the standards of reason is rather like using a chocolate teapot for a brew-up: there is little point and it will all end in a mess eventually.

<sup>18</sup> See Anthony Holden (1990) *Big Deal*, London. In this memoir retells how he would sit in on games with amateurs, acting like a 'klutz', like he hadn't played before 'in the interests of mopping up later on.' (7) There is quite a history of the gambler represented as a kind of cheat, as someone who will fleece you if you should be vulnerable enough. Henry Chafetz's (1962) *Play the Devil*, New York, observes that the Mississippi riverboat gamblers of the 19<sup>th</sup>



daring, but ultimately futile, gambling experiment, Thomas Bass in *The Newtonian Casino*, reveals in the course of recounting the adventures of a group of scientists attempting to operate a scam at the roulette tables (using a miniature shoe-fitted computer), chance will make a chump of even the most rational scientist.

Nor was the irony of this lost on Bass, as we see amongst the revelations of an enterprise that seriously entertained the belief in reason overcoming chance, he is sincere enough to place his experiences beneath an epigram bearing the name of Niels Bohr: "Prediction is very difficult," Bohr had said, "especially of the future."

This was realized to be true in retrospect, although we are left wondering at the lack of scepticism at the outset of the enterprise, at their unbridled optimism. Were they really as naive as all those marble-headed believers in luck? Those 'chumps'? It seems that the power of reason is, at times, intoxicating.<sup>19</sup>

There may be only two ways to win at gambling. The first is by being lucky. The second is by cheating – and even then you need a great deal of luck to carry it off without being caught. A professional will tell you that there is a third way. Skill. But the elevation of skill restricts the motion to a workmanlike activity, rather than the unhindered free motion of the gamble, and besides that, this skill still finally rests on chance; on the confluence of a staggering number of variables beginning with the player, and then, if he is playing poker, for instance, extending to the people sitting at the table with him, and continuing into considerations of the atmospheric conditions of a room and what effect these may have. Never can all the variables be brought under control. Thomas Bass and his friends found that whilst they were able to predict the fall of a roulette ball with relative accuracy under laboratory conditions, once in the casino environment the first obstacle to a realization of expectations was confronted in the form of the croupier – how hard would he spin the wheel? When would he release the ball? And from this they then found that unexpected sights, smells, and other people could upset their attempts to re-create the impossibly 'real' conditions of the laboratory. A controlled environment has possibly nothing in common with the unfolding events of a serious gambling situation.

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century were underworld figures, perceived capable of any crime: 'the gamblers are coming' was a 'signal for alarm' in the river towns. 55.

<sup>19</sup> See Thomas A. Bass (1990) *The Newtonian Casino*. Bass was one of the group as well. Their inability to conquer chance had interesting side effects, leading them to developments in chaos theory.



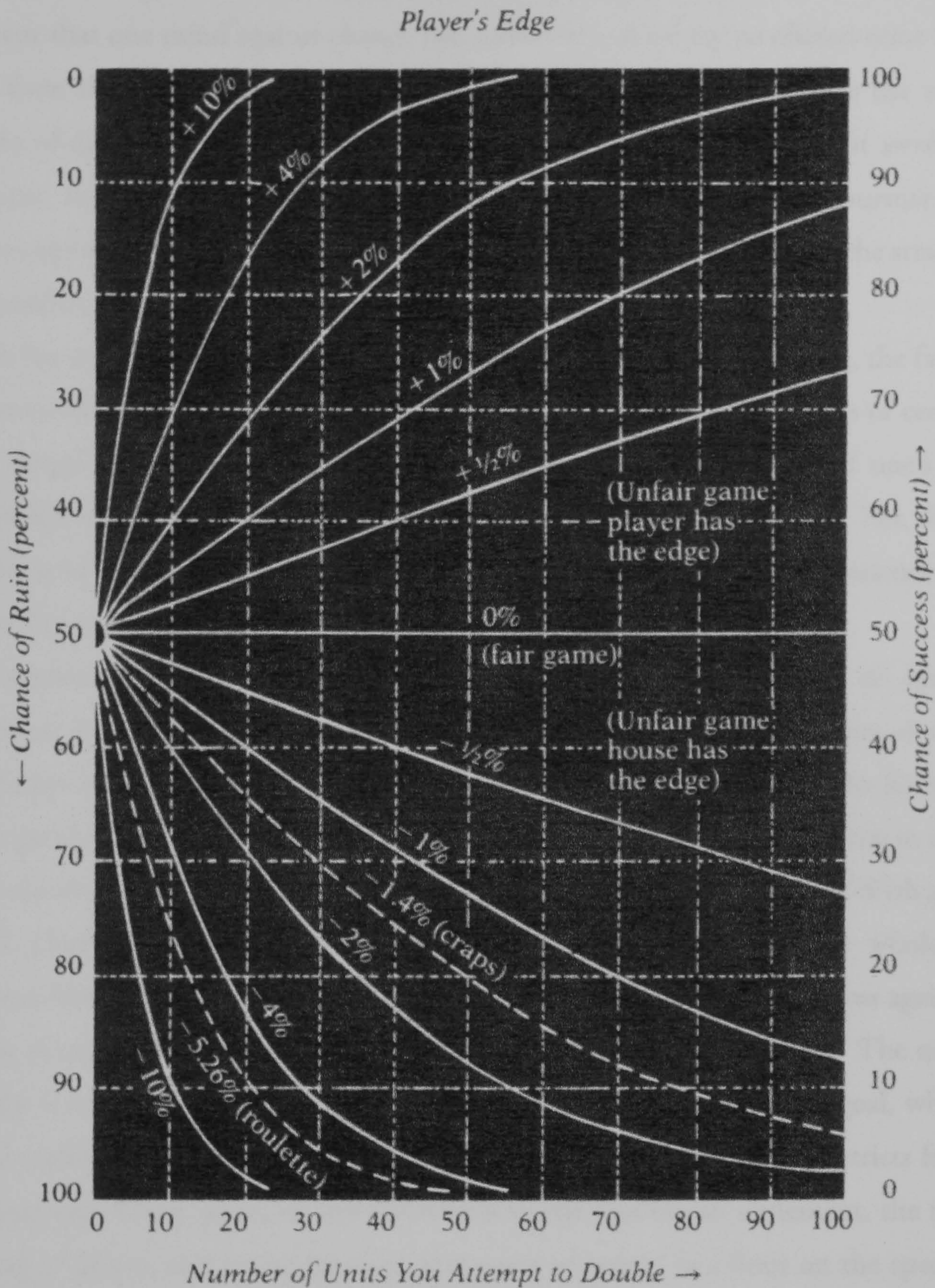


PLATE 7. THE PROBABILITY OF A GAMBLER'S RUIN. As an indication of the contrast between gambling and work, consider this chart designed by Allan Wilson and printed in his 1970 book *The Casino Gambler's Guide*. To attain a predetermined certainty of success the player would use this 'map' of chance as it suited particular games. As Thomas Bass explained: "take as an example the average card-counter who plays blackjack with a 1 percent advantage over the house. Find the curve on the diagram representing this player's edge of +1 percent. Now let's say the card counter wants to play blackjack with an 80 percent certainty of doubling his money. He calculates his proper bank-to-bet ratio by locating the intersection of the +1 percent curve and the horizontal 80 percent success line. He then drops down to the bottom of the graph to see that he should divide his bank into 70 units. A gambler betting all his money on the first draw would be playing with a bank of one unit, while a more conservative player might wish to extend the curve and play with a bank divided into more than a hundred units." See Thomas A. Bass, 1990, *The Newtonian Casino*, pp. 156-158.



And so, the problem in bringing reason to bear in gambling is that it soon becomes apparent that one mind against chance has, effectively, as we say *no chance*; none beyond luck. Even the marshalling of a collective effort cannot ultimately reduce the variables outside of one's control. Thus, to fully engage in a wager, to forget about *working* the situation, means also forgetting the probabilities. To the gambler as pursuer of the Maybe, consideration of the probabilities in calculation is as confining as the straitjacket on a madman: it quells an intrinsic propensity to disorder.

In the memoirs of gamblers, and in the fictional accounts of gambling, the fallibility of reason seeps from the pages in recollections of dashed beliefs in 'degrees of certainty,' 'sure things' and 'hot hands' – all sincerely held on the flimsy basis of one's partial knowledge of the situation mixed with the conviction of personal skill. The dawning awareness of the inevitability of loss provokes a tacit recognition of the aloneness of the wager. This seems inescapable.

Gamblers are fundamentally loners, and the wager is a moment of existential *presentness* difficult to share in any commonly held understanding of *being* as rational autonomy, which is to say, in terms that are understood as 'reasonable.' The loner status of the gambler is not just a matter of other players being potential opponents in a game; it is a matter of the difficulty, if not impossibility, of gambling in groups. "With groups" David Thomson suggests in his history of gambling in Nevada, "the whole thing becomes like a stock market. When individuals gamble they pit themselves against the weight of others, and of history. They also mean to redesign the future."<sup>20</sup> The nomadic impulse is compromised in agreement with others to pursue a common goal, which we would understand as a kind of 'settlement,' that, as the word suggests, restricts freedom of movement. Once again, we are taken back to the Hobbesian settlement, the rational binding of desire, and to the Kantian autonomy of reason as a limit on the speculative aspect of the human instinct. It is within this context we note with interest that the forerunners of the founders of Las Vegas were the 19<sup>th</sup> century gold prospectors, men

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<sup>20</sup> See David Thomson (1999) *In Nevada: the Land, the People, and God*, London: 22. Thomson's history of Nevada is illuminating, revealing the closeness of the Nevada of the gambling towns of Reno and Las Vegas, to the spirit of prospectors who opened up the harsh desert landscapes, leaving behind – in a demonstration of hopes cherished and abandoned – as many ghost towns as settlements.



who had a contempt for the very idea of society as a limitation on freedom of movement.<sup>21</sup>

But most notable in all attempts to meet the wager with reason, all this attention to detail, is that there is too much emphasis on past and future – of the mounting losses, the lessons of experience, and of the consequences for the future. Thus, the blinkers, we might say, are never really removed, and there is no chance for experience to arrive unmediated, and this is a crucial difference between reason and wager. It marks the departure of the gambler from normality. To confront the future requires immediacy, seen in a bold and sure removal of strategies of calculation and forethought, which would only serve to mediate the wager, thereby reducing its potency.

When playing these games, in other words, there is a point at which action must stop, deliberation must be abandoned, and the non-intentional movement *of the play* takes over the player. This, players refer to as ‘the action’ or ‘the juice.’

Gamblers that are motivated by a desire for ‘the juice’ are not really interested in winning or losing, if we take these to have a financial meaning, although winning is preferable to the extent it permits the extension of play. We see in Dostoevsky’s Alexei, for example, that the play becomes all there is – piles of money are pushed onto red, or black, as if in a dream. And whilst his initiation to gambling is towards the end of securing the love of Paulina, instead he ends up loving gambling for its own sake. He carries the anguish that, as Georges Bataille said, cannot be relieved. This too is the story of many who go in search of ‘the juice.’

### *The Body in Pain*

The wager approaches a total openness that removes a prior tension built up in pursuit of ‘the juice,’ which is to say that the tension initially arises as a matter of pursuing the essence of play. This is the anxiety that Georges Bataille spoke of, the restlessness that never finds a suitable resolution, and in which everything that has been willed stops for a moment once this motion to wager is undertaken. But motion does not cease.

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<sup>21</sup> It is worth quoting Thomson (1999) further on this. “There are Nevadans, and not only the prospectors holed up at the ends of remote box canyons, who would prefer no government at all. In the early years, Nevada was so empty, arid and inhospitable, it attracted those people who were willing to live apart from all semblance of order. I sat in a diner in Fallon once, eating my lunch and listening to two men at another table who were on such a steady matter-of-fact rant against all government and all ‘theys’ who sought to impose regulations of any kind. It was a wonder that they were ready to abide by the institution of the diner, its agenda (the menu), or the white lines on the tarmac of the diner’s parking lot.” (33)



Outwardly it may appear so, concealed by the gambler's habitual resort to adopting a 'face' appropriate to the situation.

This is the 'cool-headed,' or 'marble-headed' approach, which we also know as the poker face that conceals the restlessness of unseen emotions. As Dostoevsky's Alexei, for example, watches the General win twice in succession at the roulette table, and twice double his stake, to then simply lose it all in a single play, he remarks on the turmoil behind the apparent calm of the mask. The general "smiled and walked away with perfect control." As a gambler, Alexei also knew that the General must have been desperately struggling to prevent the mask from slipping. Underneath such a calm display, he knew it was a kind of hell, an exquisite torture. "I am convinced that black cats were clawing at his heart," Alexei remarks of the difficulty of containing the violent swing of alternating hopes and fears, the oscillation of affirmation and denial, momentarily calmed in the wager, are now barely concealed.

The reaction of gamblers to the dreadful delivery of chance is often expressed in terms that show it to be all consuming; the mental anguish that finds momentary relief before the resolution of the wager, is replaced in its immediate aftermath by 'physical' shocks. Prior to embarking on a winning streak, Alexei himself experiences bodily sensations of madness-inducing discomfort, of "fiery ants" crawling all over his body.<sup>22</sup> This is a common enough kind of psychophysical state related in experiences of gambling. Before and after each wager there is the predictable ebb and flow of emotions – one second dazed, moments later frenzied: "Casually she flipped her card down with the corner of the jack. Was an ace. I felt that," says Ray in Frederick Barthelme's *Bob The Gambler*. It was the sensation of "an electric shock, a four-by-two brought down across my back."<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Ray keeps playing as the losses mount and he is thrown back, yet again, into this *to-ing* and *fro-ing*. "I felt as if rows of needles were running along the tops of my shoulders and up both sides of my neck into the scalp behind my ears," he says. And later still he admits a final numbing effect in the tension. "I felt like a robot," he says.<sup>24</sup>

The ultimate removal of self in the affirmation of the 'maybe' of the wager occurs in a moment of suspense. The player is taken over by the play itself, as if cast up into the

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<sup>22</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky (1981) *The Gambler*, New York and London: 144.

<sup>23</sup> Frederick Barthelme (1997) *Bob The Gambler*, Boston and New York: 132.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid: 133-34.



air by a whirlwind – released by gravity, hovering above the ground as if on a balloon, suspended on a high wire with no safety net – the loss of a connection to anything is felt dizziness of the head that may be accompanied by nausea. The moment of submission can have a brief calming effect, and although preceded by a frenzy following the placing of the wager, producing a heightened sensory movement during which “the nerves may stand on end and scream to themselves,” it is nevertheless taken over by “a tranquility as from heaven.”<sup>25</sup>

But the suspense also threatens violence in the resolution of the wager, which is drawn out tortuously:

It’s ruthless. Completely ruthless. The cards terrorize you. Seconds stretch. It’s like having the worst flu you can imagine for twenty seconds.<sup>26</sup>

In their memoir of a hectic period of gambling, the Barthelme brothers, Frederick and Steven, remark that the involuntary play of chance begins a movement that takes over from the last *act*, the placing of the wager. Thus motion succeeds action. The player actually ceases at this point to be a player at all, and instead becomes an observer of the scene that unfolds; detached, yet still involved, it is like being taken outside of oneself, held aloft, and then violently shaken:

Every gesture is half speed, quarter speed, eighth speed. The dealer’s hands – many wear lots of rings and bracelets, and the women paint and polish, and trick up their nails with inlaid stars and such – move across your field of vision like spirits. Blood rushes to your head, a sensation like a sudden rise in pressure. Your head is going to explode.<sup>27</sup>

At this point contingency is inflated to such an extent that the outcome may as well involve your living or dying. It attains this kind of psychological significance to the player. This is to jaywalk across a road with neither stop signs nor speed restrictions. It becomes an instance of submission before a terrifying and uncontrollable power, and the consequences no longer seem to matter to the gambler.

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<sup>25</sup> Stephen Crane (1902) ‘A Game of Poker,’ in *Last Words*, London: 263. Also Dostoevsky *The Gambler*, “I became frantic, seized the remaining two thousand gulden, and threw them on the first twelve numbers – just like that, without any calculation. Well, I must say, I spent a moment of suspense similar, perhaps, to that experienced by Madame Blanchard as she floated down over Paris from her balloon.” 144

<sup>26</sup> F. Barthelme, *ibid*: 167.

<sup>27</sup> Frederick and Steven Barthelme (2000) *Double Down*, Boston and New York: 118-19.



Towards the end of another failed venture at the gambling tables, Dostoevsky wrote to his wife of the mental and physical loosening:

My hands were shaking, my thoughts confused. I was somehow almost glad, I kept saying, 'Let it be, let it be!'<sup>28</sup>

What begins in the wager as a momentary cessation of action, begun with neither resignation ('no more') nor denial ('I refuse'), but by the granting of conditions under which chance will be allowed to take over, becomes an existential moment, almost a denial of the real world beyond this singular experience. This is the experience of a *Perhaps*, which, as Rodolphe Gasché wrote, signifies "without exception, a deficit of knowledge, if not a total lack of cognition."<sup>29</sup> Thus, whilst metaphorically suspended in midair, the gambler's body and mind lose all composure, all semblance of rational control – there is nothing to 'grab on to,' no tangible 'reality,' only the flux of events. We might wonder if the world can even exist for the gambler at this point?

In fact, the will under these conditions is not merely denied – it is stripped bare, and lashed into submission before it is reawakened in the frenzied grasping for something to hold onto. These moments are intensifications of the normal state of being, which is concealed by the form reason gives to experience. The contingency of one's existence is affirmed in the *lack of knowledge* that describes what Jean-Luc Nancy has called the "birth to presence." Under conditions of becoming, no 'rational' understanding seems to suffice. If the world is held in suspense during such a 'birth,' then the facts of knowledge, as they were, mean nothing. Of course, this is a perfect correlate to the wager: there is no knowledge; there are no facts that make any difference to the outcome of the wager. It is the suspension of not only the gambler, but also of all categories of objective meaning.

The scientific temperament will not allow that reason feels drawn to such a 'non-place,' nor does it allow any room to accommodate the possibility that the 'facts' of knowledge are always in question, because that would be just the same as granting the impossibility of a state of rest, or the liquidation of reason. In contrast to reason and science, which demand at least a provisional statement of the state of knowledge be issued to direct or reprimand curiosity, the motion to wager is one instance of curiosity

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<sup>28</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky (1988) *Complete Letters*, Ann Arbor. See letter to Anna, May 21, 1867.



unleashed. Reason demands the objectification of the world. But, as the true gambler has discovered, objectivity is rubbished in the wager; thereafter the gambler is guided by one truth – *knowing* is the name we give to knowledge and also to a lack of knowledge. It is always becoming.

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<sup>29</sup> Rodolphe Gasché (1999) *Of Minimal Things*. 174.



## 4 The Revenant

Even after months of play and months of losses, even years of losses,  
we still thought we might win.

FREDERICK AND STEVEN BARTHELME, *Double Down*

The wager is a 'maybe'. In gambling, the stakes are first raised, then chance takes over, and the autonomous action of the subject ceases until, for example, the fall of the die provides a resolution. As we have seen, the gambler appears to be in control of his movements prior to the wager because they are determined acts. Nevertheless, the aftermath of the wager can see the gambler subject to an array of uncontrollable disturbances of a physical and psychological nature that intrude upon the subjective control of will. Thus, the parasite invades and takes over its host to the gambler – the gambler begins this, but thereafter the control of his movements belongs to something else.

Gambling, in the sense of speculating on the future is to venture, to *hazard* – to try and accelerate time and cause whilst the corporeal remains rooted in the present.<sup>1</sup> Gambling, viewed in the totality of its course (pre- and post-wager) is a perpetual restlessness only momentarily interrupted by the overtaking of play. And so within any notion of gambling we cannot deny that the aim of such internal movement is found in the final plunge into uncertainty. And whilst the wager makes explicit the fact that subjective will is both realised (in attaining the uncertain state) and held in abeyance (in being overtaken by chance), it is nevertheless the case that gambling enterprise is

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<sup>1</sup> On the other hand life, suspended between birth and death, can be taken as one big gamble that is never resolved until death. More particularly, everyday life in modern society also involves many endeavours of which the outcome is unknown – choosing a career, a partner, a home. Whereas the speed of events in wagering makes the resolution of the bet more or less immediate, the 'bets' we make in life, according to Erving Goffman, are marked by a delayed resolution: "the period during which the consequences of [a] bet are determined [...] will be long, sometimes extending over decades, followed by disclosure and settlement phases that are themselves lengthy. See Erving Goffman (1967) *Interaction Ritual*: 155-56.



characterised by a movement that is as equally necessary as the suspense brought about in and by the wager. Which is to say that the activity can also be seen as the conscious crossing of some threshold that separates non-gambling from gambling, and 'normal' activity from exceptional activity.

Gambling can then be located apart from 'normal' conditions of experience, both in terms of the motion of the body in space (entering a different environment, such as a casino, or as we saw with Paul Auster's character Jim Nashe, taking the wrong road), and in terms of the organization of time in a regular cycle (the weekend, the holiday, and so on). To venture over the threshold is, therefore, to 'flow' out of everyday life. Once this step is taken – a move that is itself a bold departure from norms and expectations – then all rules are up for reconsideration, and the conditions of experience can no longer be assumed to fall into a pattern of regularity.

This departure opens a human and physical geography that often assumes the form of a radically charged sensorium, unfolding a disorientating panoply of sights, sounds, and smells. The surprise of the environment awakens the mind to a heightened state of sensitivity and provokes the necessity of reducing, if not abandoning, normal expectations. This will, of course, be variable in terms of the actual space entered, but this is not the crucial determinant in the disorientation effect. For instance, there is certainly a difference in magnitude in walking on the one hand into a familiar local bookmaker's to place a bet, and on the other driving across the Mojave Desert from afar to enter Las Vegas for similar reasons. The latter involves a more drawn out re-orientation of self, and a more emphatic demonstration of the power contained in an act of removing oneself to another kind of place. So it is within the subject, and in the subjective response to altered spatio-temporal conditions, that the stripping away of normal experience takes place.

### *Transcendence*

Las Vegas is, of course, the modern gambling playground taken to impossible extremes. Whilst the experience of such a radically 'unreal' place is generally unrepresentative of gambling experiences as a whole, it is the place that provides the obvious example of



gambling being constituted of a transcendence of the mundane into a state of mental and, in this case, physical otherworldliness.<sup>2</sup>

Las Vegas is taken as the fullest realization of the totality of the possibilities offered to the gambler, in that the city as a whole creates the most permissive environment for all kinds of wagering. The sense of removal, of the significance of difference is palpable before there is even a gaming table or slot machine in sight.<sup>3</sup> Driving across the Mojave Desert in the direction of the Nevada border, for example, temptation is thrown up at regular intervals in the form of gigantic roadside invitations. *First Chance! State Line 42 Minutes* one reads (Plate 8). This is a neat inversion of the normal expectation that that the arrival of a destination should be computed and expressed in terms of the distance remaining in miles or kilometers. How far is forty-two minutes you are left to wonder? Well, that depends on the speed with which you move, in which case it is almost tempting to think of the sign as an invitation to press the accelerator pedal a little harder and simply make those forty-two minutes move even faster.

Las Vegas provides the means to subvert all kinds of identity relations that enable us to firmly locate ourselves within reality. From the gaudy hotels and bars of Fremont Street and the Strip – the drive-in wedding chapels to the glorious neon facades of nighttime – reason may justifiably suggest one's temporary loss in a waking dream. In just a minute you'll pass through St. Mark's Square in Venice, and take a gondola to ... Treasure Island. There, right in front of your eyes, as you step back onto land – that is, the pavement – is a gigantic battleship, pirates swinging from the masts, the air ripped by cannon fire. These phenomena are only too 'real.'<sup>4</sup> You have just moved from the Venetian, a hotel-casino that inside, amongst the gambling halls and shopping malls, contains 'Venice, Italy,' to a view that takes in the Treasure Island hotel-casino, by comparison more sedate, although this does not convey the nonetheless fantastical re-orientation involved when arriving at such a place. Taxis pull up in front of the hotel to

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<sup>2</sup> As I have said in the introduction to this work, the subject of disorder necessarily becomes also the subject of all exceptions and deviations from the norm. In other words, it is precisely that which is *not* representative that provides the material of this work, because this is what also illustrates the contingency of knowledge and order.

<sup>3</sup> See F. Anderton, and J. Chase (1997) *Las Vegas: A Guide to Recent Architecture*. London

<sup>4</sup> This may be seen as just an exaggeration of what is common to most, if not all, gambling environments, and that is that they are constructed to mark off the experience as existing apart from the normal. See, for example, Jamie Reid (1993) *A Licence to Print Money*. Edinburgh; Michael Konick (1999) *The Man With the \$100,000 Breasts, and Other Gambling Stories*. Las Vegas; John D. Rosecrance (1985) *The Degenerates of Lake Tahoe*. New York; Gerda Reith (1999) *The Age of Chance: Gambling in Western Culture*. London.





PLATE 8. MOTION TO WAGER. It is interesting that the separateness of Las Vegas becomes apparent on driving through the Mojave Desert. Miles from the Nevada border temptations are thrown up at regular intervals, increasing the perception that some liminal boundary approaches. On the Las Vegas strip tourists are conveyed from street level to passes over the road that conveniently direct one, in an ever so subtle manner, to the door of the next hotel-casino, and, of course, respite from the sweltering heat. (Photographs by author)



be met by a man attired to look like a pirate from Robert Louis Stevenson's tale – as the door of your taxi opens you hear an indeterminate, although, it seems, caricatured voice of a sea-faring fellow, perhaps from the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century, say: “may I take your bags, Cap'n?” You have just moved between two realities; although the truth is you have merely moved a few hundred yards, or a few miles.<sup>5</sup>

The fantastical dimension is most evident in these ludicrous, not to say over-the-top hotel-casinos, and is one that is easily transferred to imagination. On approaching the city road at night Las Vegas appears as a bountiful forest surrounded by desert, an invitation to total indulgence after the privations of ‘normality.’ From the fauna and flora of the neon forest that passes for a skyline, thrown into seductive relief by the blackness of the sky all around, to the apparent mirage of the hotel *Mirage* itself – the lush greenery of Polynesia in the desert. This stands as the ultimate Las Vegas metaphor the mask of a surface that is all illusory.<sup>6</sup> No water in the desert? That's reality – in the sweltering heat of Las Vegas, however, a fine spray of cool water may accompany a walk from a pavement onto a moving walkway, this leading finally to the air-conditioned gaming rooms of the tastelessly opulent casinos.

Arriving at the airport is an equally dramatic and disorientating experience as well. The difference of the environment is thrust upon you immediately. You move through a “maze of what used to be one-armed bandits, now replaced by sophisticated video slots, surrounded by bars, cocktail waitresses and all the seductive trappings of a downtown casino” – and this is before claiming your luggage.<sup>7</sup> You could be forgiven for thinking that this was it. That you had actually landed directly at the casino, and in a way you have, because the total orientation of the city is towards gambling. And here, in the airport, amongst the loudspeaker announcements and the aimless looking zigzagging of travelers, you hear the sound of an insistent voice underpinned by a hubbub of rhythmic jangling and clatter, it sings a welcoming hymn to all this chaos:

*How I wish that there were more than the twenty-four hours in a day*

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<sup>5</sup> The mock battle at the Treasure Island hotel casino is a re-enactment of a scene from R.L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. However, in Las Vegas the battle between the Hispaniola and HMS Britannica takes place every 90 minutes of the evening. Every day.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Tom Wolfe (1965) *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*. New York.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Holden (1990) *Big Deal*, New York: 2.



*Even if there were forty more I wouldn't sleep a minute away  
Oh, there's blackjack and poker and the roulette wheel  
A fortune won and lost on every deal  
All you need is a strong heart and a nerve of steel  
Viva Las Vegas!*

Someone has just hit the jackpot on one of numerous new 'Elvis' slot machines that are littered all over the place. The jangle of falling coins as they hit the aluminium collecting cup is serenaded by Elvis's injunction to 'keep on the run,' and 'have some fun.' The irony of Elvis Presley's sad demise in this eternal city does not go unnoticed, although it does not remove the feeling that there is nowhere better to get fast and loose.<sup>8</sup> The meaninglessness of time here, the utter superfluity of clocks is as evident in the twenty-four hour availability of anything you might want as it is in the casinos, traditionally devoid of clocks and natural light, lest reality should find a way in.

Whilst the possibilities for gambling are everywhere in Las Vegas to the extent that you cannot really escape it, most of the casinos are concentrated within an area of several miles of the city known as The Strip, which runs straight through the newest part of the city. The concentration of gambling opportunities has a double benefit. It enables the gambler an ease of movement between casinos, and it allows the casinos to more effectively pull you in their direction, often literally so.<sup>9</sup> Whilst this is most obvious in Las Vegas of all the gambling places in Nevada, with its higher concentration of casinos, there is no less of an attempt to suggest a similar kind of opulence, of a change of fortune beckoning, in some smaller towns. Where opulence is absent the suggestion of transcendence remains. They too will have dream palaces with "some name like Nugget, Bonanza, or Lucky Strike, names that defy the listless air of the place and its hollow assurance of transformation."<sup>10</sup>

In a further demonstration of the subjectivity of experience, this hollow assurance is also the lightning flash of hope that appears suddenly in the invitation to wager.

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<sup>8</sup> A further irony lies in the suggestion that the singer barely eked out an existence in his final years at this place, as his fortune dwindled whilst his manager lost many millions of his money at the roulette tables. See Peter Guralnick (1999) *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley*. New York.

<sup>9</sup> On Las Vegas strip this has been engineered to an extreme degree of efficiency. Hotel-casinos are connected by moving sidewalks, and sometimes also by monorail. The scorching heat in high season can be unbearable, but the casinos kindly offer pleasant movement between one air-conditioned palace and the next. Pavements come to an abrupt end at road intersections on the Strip, and there is no allowance made for the possibility that the pedestrian might want to take the direct route to the other side of the road, i.e., by walking across the road. Instead, an escalator takes you up from sidewalk level, across and above the road towards the entrance of the next casino. At this point it is over one hundred degrees. You are offered the choice of continuing through the casino, or an escalator back down to the sweltering heat of the street.



Entering a casino the atmosphere comes like a smack in the face. “Steve swears it’s the air conditioning,” Frederick Barthelme says:

As soon as it hits you, he says, you’re gone. We open the doors and we’re washed with treated air, the din, the scent of money, liquor, smoke, adrenalin and after-shave. We’re keyed up now, hopeful. We walk with a sure step and purpose. Something is suddenly clear, precise, desired.<sup>11</sup>

The transforming power of this other world, however, was realized also in the fact that it was denied right up to the moment transcendence became unavoidable. That is, until it grabbed them both by the lapels and slowly shook them out of their planned strategies of moderation – always fated to end in loss. Such plans usually lasted, they say:

A half hour, sometimes an hour or two, after we hit the pushy maroon indoor-outdoor carpet, nodded in passing to the sullen security guard at his stand in front of the half-dozen glass doors, smelled the turbocharged air conditioning.<sup>12</sup>

The atmosphere, in other words, eventually wins out: it is sensory overload against reason. No contest to the weak-willed gambler. The experience may, in formal terms, simply appear as a backdrop for the action, or, as in the casino the furniture one moves around, but it contributes an often under-estimated effect to the experience: it charms and disarms those who go in search of ‘the juice.’ It is a major part of what constitutes ‘the juice.’<sup>13</sup> Entering these palaces of lost inhibitions is itself a physical movement that ultimately prompts the psychological ‘vertigo,’ as Roger Caillois said, in a loss of autonomous control:

When the cards are coming your way, and when your five thousand turns to ten, your ten to twenty, its mesmerizing. Suddenly that business they always say about feeling like you’ll live forever becomes a little bit true, because you’ve crossed over some line, gone into some other territory, become somebody else.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> David Thomson (1999) *In Nevada*, London: 60.

<sup>11</sup> F. & S. Barthelme (2000) *Double Down*, New York: 43.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid: 111

<sup>13</sup> It may be apocryphal but Bugsy Siegel, one of the founders of Las Vegas as it was in legendary times of gangsterism, is rumoured to have said that ‘with Las Vegas I no longer needed to rob people. You just put them in a casino and they will do it themselves.’

<sup>14</sup> F. and S. Barthelme, *ibid*: 105. Cf. Roger Caillois (1962) *Man, Play and Games*, London. In Edmund Bergler’s (1958) *Psychology of Gambling*, this is recognized as a failure of the ‘reality principle’ to overcome the ‘pleasure principle’: 17-18.



This is the gambler as zombie. The re-animated, will-less, reincarnation of a thousand defeats; metaphorically killed at the tables, this revenant is continually drawn back to the scene of death itself.

### *The Bends and Curves of Mind*

The appearance of the gambler in this regard – as one who returns to the scene of loss – baffles reason because we can have no knowledge or the origin of such a need.<sup>15</sup> It is curious, too, that the tendency of the mask of appearance to lead to confusion contradicts Hobbes' understanding of the rational actor as someone who moves freely. In Hobbes' picture the individual is always concerned with accommodating action within an external, changing environment; quite the opposite of the zombie-like movement of the gambler, who, in ignoring all rational signals, remains oblivious to the sights and sounds that should, but fail to, reawaken sense. Nevertheless, from one standpoint both act like automata.<sup>16</sup>

Hobbes' language of psychology, which appears to render the human subject as more or less a functionally responsive automaton, or a calculating machine, nevertheless contains something more in this idea of motion, a seemingly modern view of calculation and how it relates to ancient ideas of action and character, and how these in turn refer back, somewhat loosely, although reflecting a continuity, to modern ideas of the normal. Consider the Hobbesian individual, caught between a desire for what is pleasing and the necessity of avoiding pain. He acts (that is, chooses), after deliberation, in a manner that seeks out the smoothest path, attaining a balance between the two contrary forces, which will go some way towards the satisfaction of desire, whilst also placing a limitation on threats towards well being. This rational, calculating individual is trying to chart an orderly path that will open up before his eyes, affording some scope for dealing with the

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Halliday, J. and Fuller, P. (1974) *The Psychology of Gambling*, London. Psychology offers some explanations of the persistence of gambling behaviour, for example, it is often regarded as more or less masochistic behaviour. The point I am making, however, is that autonomy consists of what can be seen or heard – in other words, the rationality is in the words and deeds of the actor and how these are interpreted. My position derives from the work of Donald Davidson, and this is a perspective on rational action that is explored in his 1980 collection *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford). It is in this Davidsonian sense that the 'empirically' available evidence of rational motives is absent because the movement of a continual return to this scene of loss is, by definition, irrational, and thus contradicts what the accumulation of causal knowledge ought to reveal to the subject.

<sup>16</sup> Hobbes: "For seeing life is but a motion of Limbs, the beginning whereof is in some principall part within; why may we not say, that all *Automata* (Engines that move themselves by springs and wheelles as doth a watch) have an artificiall life? For what is the *Heart*, but a *Spring*; and the *Nerves*, but so many *Strings*; and the *Joynts*, but so many *Wheelles*, giving motion to the whole Body, such as was intended by the Artificer?" See, Hobbes (1991) *Leviathan*, Cambridge: 9. Cf. Daniel Tiffany (2000) *Toy Medium*, Berkeley, CA.



contingencies of existence. This attempt to chart a more or less straight line stems, as Hobbes makes clear, from a fear of death.<sup>17</sup>

Hobbes addressed the problem of how we may live together in a world that was conceived as matter in motion, a motion moreover with the potential for explosive conflict. He saw reason take a form that has become familiar throughout the development of the modern world; which is to say, reason would be the basis of social stability, meaning that rational action was necessary in order to plan ahead, and for example, to make predictions about the future. And so reason is derived from the necessity of addressing the contingent, in other words the whole history of reason is about excluding what is not understood, or what is dangerous, or anomalous.

If we add to this the particular state of such a modern consciousness – inwardly directed (conscious of the threat of harm) as much as it is facing the world (acting on the basis of these perceptions), and always caught up in doubt of one sort or another (over beliefs, choices of action, which arise from our sense of motion in others). At this point we can see that the failure to maintain ‘harmony’ in the Hobbesian picture arises because of an inability to stem a doubt over one’s own survival, which should be rationally replaced by the assurance given by the collective binding of subjects; that is, by a limitation on individual motion. This constitutes a directedness that should negate the anxiety produced by doubt. We have then to consider that consciousness as seen by René Descartes – doubting – as the “immanent principle of self-movement,” and the movement that persists within the subject at all times, undermines Hobbesian rational action, or to put it another way: doubt seeks to be certain of the future, yet undermines the stability of a self that would be so certain.<sup>18</sup>

Doubt is thus not only a manifestation of uncertainty; doubting itself also represents a dissatisfaction, or an uneasiness with the way things are – and if we refer this doubting back to knowledge – as Descartes himself did – it is implicitly distrustful of the ‘facts’ as manifested in the accumulation of certainties. We can look at this in practical terms: under the habitual constraints of modern living, as symbolized, for example, by the

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<sup>17</sup> *Leviathan*, Chapter 6 on The Passions, and Chapter 13 The Natural Condition of Mankind. Hobbes’ whole psychology of man has been claimed to be in error as it rests on a misrepresentation of this ‘natural condition’. See, for example, C.B. MacPherson (1962) *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, Oxford. MacPherson, however, starts from an equally specious point of view that all men are naturally co-operative. The intractability of these arguments, common to all ‘state of nature’ arguments does not divert us from the point here, which is that Hobbes’ entire psychology of man rests on some idea of motion, and that this has some connection to ideas of the best way of living now and in ancient times.



discretely arranged categories of 'work' and 'play'; by the division of labour, and also by the more specific allotment of time to particular roles and tasks, the 'internal motion' of the doubting *subject* must be expressed in Cartesian terms. However, doubt becomes in modern society the source of all calculations undertaken to move away from doubt itself to stem the immanent disorder that lies within, which is to say the doubt of the subject becomes, in social terms, manifested as a more or less Hobbesian social order.

A state of controlled movement (the equilibrium of normal movement, for example) actually compels one to motion beyond this state; it provokes restlessness and a desire for variability in experience.<sup>19</sup> We are not so mechanical in our activities that necessary roles and tasks can be withstood for very long periods of time.<sup>20</sup> The self-conscious subject submits, for the most part, therefore, to the rational imperatives of life, although always in the knowledge that society will not make of him a prisoner, confined to careful movements along straight lines, or sign-posted streets.

The dual nature of our consciousness of the world and of the self as a part of and apart from this world is summed up by ideas of motion (the adherence to spatio-temporal objectivity) and suspense (transcending the limits of space and time), and so by the importance we attach to mindfulness on the one hand, and forgetfulness on the other. And that is to say, each property of such duality requires the other; the character of identity as difference provides the only grounds for making the distinction. Forgetfulness is inclusion as much as exclusion, and as such it becomes manifest in the focus of attention.

Most gambling opportunities are created, and exist in the full knowledge of the oscillatory character of modern life. Without play, work becomes impossible and meaningless. We travel back and forth between the two, but this once again is in origin an inward movement; the subject, in adhering to the separation, simply objectifies the spatio-temporal reality, it becomes part of consciousness. And with the exception of professional players (whose status as gamblers can be doubted), all gambling will usually

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<sup>18</sup> Harvie Ferguson (2000) *Modernity and Subjectivity*, Charlottesville: 4.

<sup>19</sup> Without wishing to suggest that a functional analysis of gambling comes closest (if that is at all possible) to revealing the sources of motivation in gambling, it must still be admitted that there is a human desire for variable behaviour, emanating from a similar source to that of Descartes' doubt – that is, from uncertainty or scepticism.

<sup>20</sup> Hobbesian motion is only determined to the extent that external stimuli direct the mind's attention to the circumstances and consequences of movement. Once again this does not go as far as suggesting a structural-functional account of action insofar as it is not argued that a specific set of conditions, when faced by the individual, will always produce a necessary effect. That Hobbes was being prescriptive – rather than providing some kind of systemic analysis



be a temporary activity. This is why gambling is about movement to and fro as much as it is about suspense. It is the movement of self from one place to another – and the wager is destination, or rest. And to reach a destination implies a journey.

The ‘distance’ traveled is important as well. If nothing is at stake, then the destination will not differ radically from where one normally ‘resides,’ and so, the furthest one can ‘travel’ is the product of wagering everything. Not having anything at stake makes for a non-gambling situation. Professional players may have only a passing involvement with the existential being of the true gambler. Gambling is their ‘job.’ They move to and fro just as people who work in ‘regular jobs’ do – they simply invert the expectation by working at games, rather than playing at games. They do not habitually expose themselves to the same kind of risk as a gambler.<sup>21</sup> If this is doubted just consider what a professional card player, for example, actually does. This individual is a highly primed calculating machine, capable of sitting at a poker table for hours on end without need for either sustenance or relief. This involves a high degree of concentration: the mind must constantly be at work attempting to stay on top of the situation.

The legendary poker player Nick the Greek once said “going to the bathroom during a poker or a dice game is a mistake. You might miss a hot hand worth a hundred thousand.”<sup>22</sup> To deny such basic physical needs takes a monumental effort of will. The non-professional gambler, on the other hand, the player in search of the juice, begins in play, to hover between existence and non-existence: already relieved of the mental constraints, already metaphorically incontinent.

Professional players are Hobbesian calculators engaged with games – they are pragmatic and utilitarian in outlook. They have plans, goals, and, if you like, road maps to determine their rational expectations of rectilinear movement. On the other hand, those in search of the juice dispense with all this useless knowledge because they understand something else about gambling, and that is in the tacit admission provided by evidence of returning to the scene of a previous demise, that in the wager the real contingency of existence is glimpsed – in other words, the possibility of one’s own non-

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– is evidenced by the fact that his argument rests on the idea that war, for example, results from a failure to act with full deliberation.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Holden, *ibid*: 5, makes clear the distinction: “The difference between a gambler and a poker player is a crucially simple one. A gambler, be he one who bets on horses or sports events, on casino games or raindrops running down window-panes, is someone who wagers unfavourable odds. A poker player, if he knows what he is doing, is someone who wagers favourable odds. The one is a romantic, the other a realist. It is a distinction worthy of an inscription on a Greek urn.”



existence. The removal of rational strategies delivers an immediacy of experience that is the attraction of the wager.

In the immediate you are nowhere. In the 'now' there are no maps – it is the ultimate non-place.<sup>23</sup> There can be no calculation of futures, and no denial of bodily movements in plunging into chance. The inability to retain a firm grip on oneself can have, as we saw, unlikely physical symptoms. Most curious of these is said to have accompanied a losing streak by Dostoevsky, who experienced such a loss of power over himself, over bodily functions, that he attained orgasm at the roulette table. On losing, no less.<sup>24</sup>

So, it is precisely the distance traveled from the habitual, from day-to-day routines and expectations that raises the importance of the wager as the primary and defining feature of a pure gambling experience. This does not suggest for a moment that all that passes for gambling actually attains this essential state of the wager. But neither can we deny that the further the subject intentionally moves from the day-to-day pattern of life, the more contingency threatens to 'blow up,' or spout forth over the road ahead. All gambling, then, is ultimately reducible to the wager, and the more boldly that mediating factors are removed (or that they can be ignored), the more significant the wager. The wager is singular and as such it directs the player inward, to the infinity of the subjective. And so, we may say, this is not the proper kind of subject for analysis, or for scientific explanation – it cannot be adequately objectified.

In the contemporary literature of scientific and now medical research on the subject of gambling there is no room made for the wager, although much is made of the variety of gambling forms, of concrete features of certain games, and of myriad other kinds of classification in attempts to understand or explain the 'why' of gambling. We can argue that this would be the wrong question to ask, because, as we have seen games provide only the 'permission' to wager. This 'why,' the seeking of causes, is always at the expense of the 'what' of gambling – as for example, the lack of knowledge of *what* is happening in gambling; or what sets it apart from other forms of interaction, from modes of experience with which it is sometimes compared, and so on.

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<sup>22</sup> Cited in Paul Lyons (1999) (ed.) *The Quotable Gambler*, New York: 167.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Marc Augé (1995) *Non-Places: Towards an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, London.

<sup>24</sup> This claim is made by Alan Wykes (1964) *Gambling*, London. He does not reference the source, except to say that it was contained in a letter to his wife.



Arguing for the centrality of the wager to an understanding of gambling might also be construed as an essentialist strategy, as a denial of 'the facts,' a metaphysical obfuscation. This might be the case, insofar as communication of the meaning of the wager necessitates the statement of unverifiable sensory experiences. In this sense the wager is also a denial of reality. However, this is not the point at stake here. The wager has no essence – there is no universal experience. On the other hand the experiences of the wager are united in one thing, and that is the denial – in various ways – of the real. The wager is nothing in the sense that where the real is something identifiable, it is pure nothingness.

So, whilst poker players, or horseplayers, may certainly derive pleasure from an understanding of the various rules and norms that constitute the game, and from an opportunity to display skill, the point is that to wager requires no formal games at all. In fact, the most extreme examples of the wager probably involve the player essentially wagering against himself, as Nashe, in *The Music of Chance* clearly does.<sup>25</sup> By comparison, analysis of patterns of lottery play, or slot play or any other type of game really only reveals the extent to which the importance of being is ignored because it does not fully manifest itself as part of the mask of appearance that is the domain of rational enquiry. To purchase a lotto ticket once or twice a week, or to bet on a horse a few times a year may be a lot less like gambling than, for instance, boarding a train without either a ticket or knowledge of its destination. Which is to say, again, that the game is just the vehicle. And although there can be a quantitative determination of the seriousness of the wager the extent of this seriousness cannot really be communicated by objective 'facts,' such as money staked, or regularity of play, and so on. As we saw in the case of Dostoevsky's Alexei he gambled first for someone else – for the woman he loved, then because gambling was the only thing he could love; it was the only way he could *be*.

The motion that leads to the point of suspense can only have meaning when the precipice is near, that is, when 'being' is itself in question. This is a determination that can only be made subjectively, a point understood by Frederick and Steven Barthelme when they remark that gambling was a complex interaction of many things – of challenge, daring, boldness, and making those close to you fearful, *but not about money* spent, or hours devoted to feeding slots. It was, as they say, a seriousness that could be

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<sup>25</sup> Although it is also implicitly gambling against normality – the internalised structure of expectations.



summed up, paradoxically, in terms of childishness; like screaming “Look, Ma. No hands!”

This also brings us back to a certain inescapable part of the description of gambling. To gamble is to *venture*, to *hazard*, to move so as to place oneself in doubt. It is difficult to objectively determine when such a point is reached because such an understanding would seek to place finite bounds on what is a unique experience, or for instance, suggest that a certain type of action is equal to danger. Once again, the wager only permits self-identification.

Certainly, what is happening in gambling for all to see is that a game is being played, but because the act of gambling constitutes an emergent reality what is really going on ventures well beyond such evidence, beyond cards, chips, slot machines and other ‘fixtures.’ Not only is the gambler suspended, in the sense that being is pregnant at the point of the wager, but the entire gambling situation forces him into collision with others similarly engaged, coming together and moving apart to create a heightened level of contingency. It is a situation marked by total flux. People become like atoms bouncing to and fro, appearing out of nowhere, and occasionally crashing into each other, before pinging off in another direction.

It may be productive if we can think about it in a slightly different way. The verb ‘to gamble’ becomes co-extensive with all other verbs: it signifies the notion that being *is* always being born. So, to be is to be neither one thing nor another.<sup>26</sup> Thus, by plunging into gambling from a state of relative control, the wager returns to consciousness the lurking contingency of existence, the fact that you might not have been born; that, for instance, you will die. It is an inflation of contingency, that, as Georges Bataille says, reason allows us to forget for the most part, but which is always there as a disease that lies dormant within the organism, a latent force with a potential to overtake one.<sup>27</sup> The immanent nature of the wager is laden with consequences of which the gambler can know little and expect even less. This is a movement that escapes the definition of ‘normal.’

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<sup>26</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy (1993) *The Birth to Presence*, Stanford, CA: “To be born is not to have been born, and to have been born. It is the same with all verbs: to think is not yet to have thought, and already to have thought. Thus ‘to be born’ is the verb of all verbs: the ‘in the midst of taking place’ that has neither beginning nor end.” (2) See also Charles H. Kahn, ‘Retrospective on the verb ‘to be’ and the concept of being’, in Knouuttila, S. and Hintikka, J. (1986) (eds.) *The Logic of Being*, Dordrecht.

<sup>27</sup> See Georges Bataille (1997) ‘Chance’ in *The Bataille Reader*. London.



What a Hobbesian idea of motion as safety does, on the other hand, is serve as a link to connect ancient and modern ideas about the 'normal.' In ancient times, the 'normal' or 'mean' related to ideas of good character, virtue, a successful life, and so on; and in modern times to ideas of normality as the absence of pathology.<sup>28</sup> In all cases what we are given is, more or less, a prescription for 'commodious' 'good' or 'healthy' living that rests upon the rational understanding and direction of motion, right down to those Hobbesian internal motions (impulses, desires, needs), which is to say, reason is the basis for continued motion (that is, living), and as such is an attempt to deflect the degenerative quality of movement.

### *Straightening*

The objective nature of the 'normal' is also historically evident in the determination of the positive values of ethical systems, which are basically concerned with controlling movement, and remaining within, for example, the confines of a 'golden mean,' or some similar name for the measure. Thus, the right path is one that strikes a balance between the individual and the social. But this does not describe a fixed path, because changing circumstances demand a realignment with objective conditions as they are encountered. Thus, there is an importance in ethical considerations especially of the appropriateness of an action, of it being understood as a response to external demands, of it having a built-in flexibility. It does not stray one way or another, but settles into a more or less straight path – and this is the crucial feature – that is always *between extremes*; it represents moderation, harmony, balance, and the avoidance of pitfalls on either side.<sup>29</sup> Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is an early example of this presentation of virtue as the attainment of balance between vices of excess and defect. What I mean to suggest is that ideas of 'the mean', of Hobbesian 'reason' and modern 'normality' all share something. At the very least, they share a hope that the pernicious dualism of self and other can be overcome. This may be stated in various ways.

For instance, in Aristotelian terms the good life is the rational life, lived according to the mean. Living according to the mean was a way of trying to resolve the conflict between self-interest and morality, of living well, or flourishing; and striking a balance

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Georges Canguilhem (1989) *the Normal and the Pathological*. New York.



between *hubris* and *moirai* – between self-will and the acceptance of fate, or chance.<sup>30</sup> This demands a community of interests. Hobbes' conception of reason as the outcome of 'deliberation,' was, too, a kind of balancing act between the conflicting desires of oneself and others, with commodious living as the ultimate aim. One difference here is that Hobbes stipulates two broad extremes which direct individual action – desire and fear – under which can be subsumed all manner of subjective beliefs and desires about orientations to the world.

Whilst in contemporary language 'normality' seems to have assumed the properties of both of these prior dualities, and the 'normal' is represented (in terms of motion) as ordered, organized, goal-directed, or centered action; that is, in terms of action it can be seen to correspond to an earlier Greek or Aristotelian conception of reason.<sup>31</sup> And this too implies something very similar to a Hobbesian 'rational binding' of desire. We cannot avoid here the medical import of this movement in terms of the modern usage of the term 'normal', especially as it has come to influence the scientific, or objective, understanding of gambling. In modern terms, then, to deviate from the norm is also meant to suggest a movement away from a centre that constitutes health, and from this towards a more or less pathological state.

A significant difference which separates the meanings of deviation from the *norm* and deviation from the *mean*, is that in the former case in falling away from the norm we are absolved of responsibility (in the sense that the individual is taken to be unwell), whilst with the latter we attract blame for a failure to act appropriately. Hobbesian ideas

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. E. Lesky (1976) *The Vienna Medical School of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, Baltimore. This was given a modern rendition in the medical theory of John Brown where health signified a normal level of stimulation between the sthenic (over-stimulation) and asthenic (understimulation).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Martha C. Nussbaum (1986) *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge.

<sup>31</sup> This is explored in Ian Hacking (1999) *The Taming of Chance*, Ch. 19. On the danger of confusing ancient and modern ideas of 'normal' he says of Aristotle's conception of the mean that it "is almost as playful as the normal [in contemporary usage]. The idea of a mean or intermediate (that's a description) which is excellent (an evaluation) is one of the most familiar of Aristotle's teachings. He did not have the is/ought hang ups inculcated by Hume. The golden mean (as the phrase is commonly understood) is golden (good) and lies (as a matter of fact) between extremes. Aristotle was subtle and careful. He wrote, 'Virtue is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency.' Then something less easy to construe: 'As far as its substance and the account stating its essence are concerned, virtue is a mean; but as far as the best and the good are concerned, it is an extremity.'" (164) However it unclear to me whether the caution urged by Hacking is necessary so long as it is clear that the discussion here centres on motion, and not on the predictive power of science. As I will discuss below, modern ideas of pathology – that is, the conventional opposite of the normal – are about motion, and they are expressed in terms of a discourse that does not avoid being evaluative. That Aristotle is talking about action is clear if we understand the difference between *substance* and *essence*. It appears that in Aristotle the 'ought' is more important than the 'is' because virtue is the *substance*; it adheres in the middle course, the mean. The *essence* of the mean course is to do the best, or to live the good life. We may note that this formulation of the essence of the mean (i.e., pursuit of *the best* in life) encourages the pursuit of an extremity, and not a mean (*the best* is surely at the limit of striving and not simply a mean?)



of motion of course involve a pragmatic imperative that is neither one nor the other of these, but which tends towards the same effect, at the risk of some danger we strike a balance. Thus the imperative is to act cautiously, or risk the inflation of injurious possibilities. This is a means of self-regulation.

To return to the modern idea of disordered movement<sup>32</sup> as ‘abnormal,’ as pathology, Ian Hacking suggests, for example, that although Aristotle’s conception of the mean cannot be directly equated in the fullest sense with the modern ‘normal,’ medicine provides a striking example of a continuity in meaning. Whilst “health as the mean [...] was part of the old medicine,” it took August Comte, and the social sciences to really take this idea to our current understanding, to place the medical notion and the ethical notion together. It was the idea that the pathological was defined as deviation from the normal that Comte elevated, thus establishing the belief that all characteristics of a thing were to be defined relative to the normal state. Accordingly, what Comte actually expressed, and bequeathed, was “a fundamental tension in the idea of the normal – the normal as existing average, and the normal as figure of perfection to which we may progress.”<sup>33</sup>

By bringing the two notions together in a modern idea of ‘normal’ what we have is a concept with two distinct applications. One the one hand we have the medical notion, that of the preservation of the physical organism, which teaches us to guard against debilitation and dissolution. Whilst on the other hand the ethical notion is directed towards our future perfectibility, our capacity to rationally choose appropriate means to our goal. And, Hacking adds, “The normal stands indifferently for what has been, good health, and for what shall be, our chosen destiny. That is why the benign and sterile-sounding word ‘normal’ has become one of the most powerful ideological tools of the twentieth century.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. the motion of turbulence and fluidity, which in modern society is seen in movements that are normal, yet unpredictable. See Z. Bauman (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge; and Hillel Schwartz (1996) ‘Torque: The New Kinaesthetic of the Twentieth Century,’ in Crary, Jonathan and Sanford Kwinter (1992) *Zone 6: Incorporations*. New York: 70-127

<sup>33</sup> Ian Hacking (1990) *The Taming of Chance*: 168.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*: 169.



## 5 This Cursed Traffic

Babylon is nothing but an infinite game of chance.

JORGE LUIS BORGES, *The Lottery in Babylon*

“Violently thumping the platter, the bones mount changing colors with the windy whisking of their hands to and fro which action in that sport they much use, smiting themselves on the breast and thighs, crying Hub Hub Hub. They may be heard playing this game a quarter of a mile off.”<sup>1</sup> So wrote William Wood in his *New England’s Prospect* of 1634, reporting his encounter with some Iroquois people playing a game he called ‘Hubbub.’<sup>2</sup>

It is not recorded whether or not William Wood took a dislike to this game, to what he may have regarded as a confused mess of noise and bodily movement. A 17<sup>th</sup> century New England colonist like Wood may have derived the name for this game from a relatively contemporary association of a ‘hubbub’ as the confused shouting, or battle cry of ‘savage’ peoples, although it is likely that this name can be traced back to an earlier association with the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis; here we see Jehovah render the speech of the builders of the city of Babylon a meaningless uproar of incommensurable tongues – thus nothing can be heard but the *hubbub*. Babylon is thus the symbol of all confusion, of all that makes no sense, of an assemblage of parts that are difficult to reconcile.<sup>3</sup>

The distaste for gambling found in the words of puritans, preachers, and sometimes, politicians, is a comment upon the moral health of the gambler, and this concern can be

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<sup>1</sup> See Henry Chafetz (1960) *Play The Devil: A History of Gambling in the United States, 1492-1950*. New York: 8

<sup>2</sup> In his *Games of the North American Indians, Volume 1*, Stewart Culin gives a detailed description of this dice game, which was universal amongst tribes of the east and west, and was known by various designations. For example, as ‘u’sēta’tina’ (literally striking or throwing against something) by the Arapaho, and ‘mo’nshimûnh’ by the Cheyenne. See Culin (1992): 53-55.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Jorge Luis Borges’ 1944 essay ‘The Lottery in Babylon,’ in *Fictions* (2000), Harmondsworth.



understood to have been transposed in modern society into a medical concern for lasting health, and thus an unease with regard to the sustainability of the social fabric, under conditions where laxity of moral sense or reason both lead to a loosening of control over body and mind, and so a threat to the maintenance of some social equilibrium. We can bring all these anxieties to a common root once we understand the fundamental point in all cases is that what we should be mindful of is the notion that motion can, or should, be controlled; it is to the potentially debasing consequences of motion, that the stigma attached to gambling finds its origin. It is only by means of order and control that the motion can be saved from becoming degenerative. Uncontrollable gamblers are known as 'degenerates' without any ironic intent; if motion is 'loose' it lacks a definite purpose, and can have no rational goal. That is gambling. In virtue of definition alone it is not 'normal.'

In modern society the social and moral concerns about the ill-effects of gambling, which have accompanied gambling to varying degrees since ancient times, become an attempt to wrestle with the problem that the turbulent motion involved is not just unpredictable, or just submission to the arbitrary, but also more importantly, perhaps, it is that the continual *oscillation* involved threatens to expose life in all its mutability. It brings to bear the horrible reality that lurks within both individual and the organism, namely their eventual deterioration. Equally dangerous from a moral, and now medical, viewpoint is the fact that the lack of firm habits can erode good character, or what is even worse, mitigating the potential for normality.<sup>4</sup> In modern psychiatry, for example, in what has emerged as the paradigm of the scientific and medical approach to the activity, gambling beyond normal limits is taken as both a manifestation of an *addiction* (in that it is claimed to progress from relatively harmless indulgence to ever more serious levels); or an example of *pathological behaviour* (in that the individual gambler is compelled to seek out gambling opportunities).

Although these both seem to refer to a similar general statement of the abnormal, the latter is actually more revealing because in the current taxonomy it places gambling amongst a group of *impulse control disorders*, along with such other recognised illnesses as

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Slavoj Žižek (1996) *The Indivisible Remainder*. London, and Gaston Bachelard's essay 'The Hand Dreams: On Material Imagination' in McAllester Jones (1991) *Gaston Bachelard: Subversive Humanist*, Madison, Wisconsin.



kleptomania, pyromania, and intermittent explosive disorder.<sup>5</sup> The compulsion, of course, removes any element of will power. Thus, in terms of the evidence for addiction, the attraction of the disorientating effects of the wager, it is suggested, provokes or inflames a distaste for normal movement into an inability to submit to rational imperatives.

But as disorder, gambling goes much further than the most perfunctory diversions from 'reality' or from what is taken to be routine. Such superficial 'wandering' may simply be found in the wishes and desires that now and again come to the fore of consciousness – in daydreaming, or in absentmindedness, for instance – before disappearing again without much of a threat to the goal-directed rational motion of habit.

### *The Motion of Degeneration*

Curiously, and in an inverse characterization of what most people would think is illness, this idea of the stability of the subject, as expressed in terms of the maintenance of body and mind, and that as a function of the self-control of rational autonomy, has now become accepted to such an extent that it is now suggested that people are addicted to staying fit, or *working* out (as it is so aptly known). That is to say, such people have developed an unhealthy relationship with their own health, culminating in the unusual situation that finds the desire to fend off the debilitating natural movement of life (ageing) can itself be destructive to mental well-being. Thus modern society produces the supreme irony in that it has elevated the desirability of physical health to such an extreme that people actually become sick in trying too vigorously to attain it.

This, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to as one of many modern 'epidemics of the will.'<sup>6</sup> And so, 'addiction' to the exercise of bodily autonomy actually results in a life lived as the ghost of an autonomous person, which is to say, in the hollow repetition of

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<sup>5</sup> See Allen F. Collins 'The Pathological Gambler and the Government of Gambling.' *History of The Human Sciences*, Vol.9, No.3, 1996: 69-100.

<sup>6</sup> See Sedgwick (1992) 'Epidemics of the Will' in Crary and Kwinter (eds.) *Zone 6: Incorporations*, New York: "In any absence of any projective hypostatization of a 'foreign' substance, the object of addiction here seems to be the body itself. More accurately the object of addiction is the exercise of those very qualities whose lack is supposed to define addiction as such: bodily autonomy, self-control, will power. The object of addiction has become, precisely, enjoyment of 'the ability to choose freely, and freely to choose health.' It seemed logically clear from the moment [in the 1980's] of this development that if exercise was addictive, nothing couldn't be; the exercise addict was really the limit case for evacuating the concept of addiction, once and for all, of any necessary specificity of substance, bodily effect or psychological motivation [...] Addiction, under this definition, resides only in the structure of a will that is always somehow insufficiently free, a choice whose volition is insufficiently pure" (583-84).



meaningless movement that ends up becoming the only point of existence. In other words, such a ceaseless activity of safety measures and careful, stealthy, movements begin to look devoid of free will. This is the existential compound interest of modern living; with pension benefits and a healthy body, who knows, it may be possible to cheat death. However, instead of being merely 'good' now in the hope of the eternal life of the next world, there is in this case no afterlife due as a consequence of this particular form of self-control – this, instead, is replaced by the hope that the wish for eternal youth may be fulfilled.

But an intensive concentration, as Aristotle noted, knocks life out of balance, and actually tends toward the erosion of character. In a modern formulation this becomes a concern over mental health, and thus a medical problem (rather than simply a moral problem).<sup>7</sup> Gambling, as a form of self-absorption, and as inwardly directed motion, becomes 'addictive' in virtue of its implicit denial of an external world that demands equal attention to that given by the subject to the whims of personal desire.

As exceptional motion, gambling is also an implicit threat to the social fabric in the sense that boldness in motion forces bodies into contact at a speed, and with a lack of foreknowledge, that can undermine existing attempts at maintaining a 'safe' or 'healthy' existence. Gambling, as we have seen, intervenes as an almost Cartesian doubt of the 'real' world – it separates the subject from the reality of an objective world, and directs self-consciousness inwards. Against the best efforts of social rationality to restrict subjectivity to a Kantian autonomy, the inwardly directed motion of the gambler eludes external judgements of what is appropriate action because it is largely imperceptible to the outside. This is part of the crucial failure of the gambler to meet the conditions of rational objectivity – rational autonomy only makes sense under conditions that allow a social understanding that becomes a case of 'being-with-others,' and not in the singularly indivisible terms of existential being as experienced by a serious gambler. For a gambler caught up in the wager, we can imagine, there is no possibility of society, for there is no basis for understanding or reciprocity.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Intellectual, or philosophical (as opposed to religious or political) moralists have often insisted on the variability of life as being of great benefit to the character. This ranges from John Stuart Mill's famous declaration that 'rather Socrates dissatisfied, than a pig satisfied' to such modern commonplaces as 'travel broadens the mind.'

<sup>8</sup> Although, this is not to overlook the fact that many gamblers claim that fellow gamblers are among the most honest people there are. Certainly, the game is social, and it represents a formalization of an agreement between players. It is a set of binding rules. I wouldn't deny this. All I say is that this is just the vehicle for the essential experience of the wager.



A corollary of the indivisibility of the wager is expressed in terms of the effect of the wager on the very social understanding it implicitly denies. For despite the exceptional nature of this experience, there can be no causal vacuum (as we saw, the gambler eventually returns to the 'normal'), and thus no action in a social or cultural environment, we can be sure, is ever wholly without consequences. Herein lies what has been one of the main sources of tension within public morality when it comes to gambling: the existential grip of the wager as the locus of all determinate motion toward that end can only be experienced by participation in its essence, by a deliberative act of wagering, yet the consequences of this motion have a potential impact on other parts of society – for example, on spouses, families, work colleagues, or even the taxpayer.<sup>9</sup> So, whilst the gambler takes all the risks, or puts all at stake, he does so only by moving out of the real world, as a part of which, of course, he exists in a prior condition of relative normality.

The degenerative power of gambling lies with the subjective immersion in the immediate that destroys not only the perception of reality, but for all practical purposes of action, and because of the unexpected power of this motion, it destroys reality itself by a gradual erosion. The disorganization implied by the absence of external constraints upon action thus contributes to a lack of mindfulness that can be corrosive in both moral and physical terms, and this is fully evident to the most serious seekers of 'the juice.'<sup>10</sup>

The knowledge of potential ruin can be alluring and dangerous in equal part, because it brings with it an awareness of the essential aloneness of such a fundamental experience, and this is a consciousness that cannot easily be communicated, and which thus may serve to reinforce the powerful grip this isolation can have on the gambler. And as such the inward motion reaches a kind of completion, and from the prior ceaseless movement being is restored or affirmed in the immediacy that follows the hollow resolution of the wager. That this lasts only momentarily does not alter the fact

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<sup>9</sup> Are the ill effects of gambling as they have come to be recognized offset by the public revenues raised by taxes on the activity? The growth of modern gambling seems to suggest so. In the U.K., Australia, and the (increasingly, also) the United States gambling has expanded as governments, for the most part operating within a framework of a public distaste of direct taxation, seek novel means of raising revenues, which of course then go towards public projects or charitable causes. This, of course, is nothing new. For the historical development of this, see Gerda Reith (1999) *The Age of Chance: Gambling in Western Culture*, London: especially 54-58; and Henry Chafetz, *ibid*: 20-28, on the development of the lottery in the United States during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g., J. Richardson (1979) *Memoir of a Gambler*, New York; F. and S. Barthelme (2000), *Double Down*, Boston; and Jonathan Rendall (1999) *Twelve Grand: the Gambler as Hero*, London.



that this is the core of the experience. Of equal importance is that the risks and attractions are undoubtedly bound up with notions of mortality, and it is not without surprise that all serious gamblers realize that there is a definite and unavoidable terminus in this life. So, the impulse to wager rests on a perception that 'normality' is itself a slow death, that work becomes the Sisyphean return of the same, by contrast with which gambling becomes the route to a realm of apparently absolute freedom.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Wager as Tragedy*

The wager is a temporary removal from this inevitability. It is not without interest either that Las Vegas's most fervent gamblers seem to be well past middle age, and may be more intent than most in fighting against the 'way of all flesh.' For people who are "facing the waning of sexuality and imminent death," Las Vegas, it has been suggested, represents the last promise of the American Dream, offering the hope that you may still, in some small way, beat the odds.<sup>12</sup> But, unfortunately, the odds of losing in casino gambling are like the odds on dying, which is to say they are perfect in the long run. In other words, not dying is as likely as anyone but the casino walking away from the gaming tables with the profits. This too, is where a subjective desire not to be dead in advance comes up against a cautious objective stewardship of life, which also aims to fend off death, but makes life appear moribund in doing so.

The metamorphosis of appearances, which is witnessed as the denial of reasonable expectations, can become repellent to a sudden exposure because it destroys conventional means of sensory identification. Anything that moves, that mutates, lacks definition. It is 'squishy,' 'unformed,' neither yet one thing nor another. It raises questions. We say 'what?' because we are not quite sure of what it might become, or

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<sup>11</sup> In Seneca's *The Apocolocyntosis* the dice playing emperor Claudius is set straight by the punishment of such a routine, forced to throw dice from a bottomless cup forever. In Paul Auster (1990) *The Music of Chance*, the two central characters (as discussed above, chapter one), Nashe and Pozzi, are set to work on building the wall in a similar 'straightening out,' with their means of ending this punishment always being snatched away from them, by ever more intricate means of calculating their debt.

<sup>12</sup> A.K. Richards and A.D. Richards, (1997) 'Gambling, Death, and Violence: Hollywood Looks at Las Vegas.' *Psychoanalytic Review*, 84(5): 770. The modal age of gamblers was found by Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce to be between 55 and 65. Of course, this may just reflect a greater availability of time upon retiral from work, and more disposable wealth when compared to younger people. The same point was made in more florid terms by Tom Wolfe (1965) *The Kandy Kololed Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby*, New York: "The allure is most irresistible not to the young but the old. No one in Las Vegas will admit it – it is not for the modern, glamorous notion – but Las Vegas is a resort for old people. In those last years, before the tissue deteriorates and the wires of the cerebral cortex hang in the skull like a clump of dried seaweed, they are seeking liberation." See also Mario Puzo (1977) *Inside Las Vegas*, New York. This book is filled with photographs of Vegas patrons, the overwhelming number of whom look past middle age.



might do. The formless throws up visions of decay and degeneration.<sup>13</sup> And as we have seen, gambling is not a 'normal' form of action – its appearance is protean in that the gambler assumes many unpredictable forms. Gambling becomes like untamed nature in all its flux. Sloughing off reason, gambling becomes 'loose' in reaching for an irrational goal, although it is really the wager that fully shakes off the binds of order and predictability. To advocates of a religious morality gambling was, in the words of one, "the perversion of a right and natural love of adventure...till it becomes the debased thrall of a world that is arbitrary and fortuitous."<sup>14</sup> To be caught up in the smallest twists and turns of your own existence, as the gambler is in the wager, runs counter to all historical pleas for social harmony and individual character. It also contributes to ideas of mental disorder, and thus gambling in the twentieth century becomes an illness.

What modern psychiatry often characterizes as the compulsion, and what is also referred to not quite accurately as 'chasing losses' (the phrase is unfortunate because of the financial implications of 'loss' within the context of gambling), but which the gambler calls 'the juice' – a need for repetition of play – practically closes out the rest of the world. The significance of the loss is in the objective view taken of it, which is rather more akin to moral and religious notions of the loss of any restraints of subjective conscience. In the 'catastrophe' of the wager, as Walter Benjamin in his brief notes on the subject said, gambling becomes "the ideal of the shock-engendered experience."<sup>15</sup> As the play reaches a denouement, loss takes on a new form, something quite different from a monetary deficit. It is the unfolding of will and the loss of subjective power that becomes apparent. "Losing [money] never feels like the worst part of gambling" at this point, write the Barthelme brothers, adding that it is rather quitting the game that often does. The severity of the gradual loss of control becomes of tragic proportions:

It is a terrible feeling to be far ahead and then start losing in a way you just can't stop – an ineluctable fall, like gravity. It makes for a frenzied abandon. You don't care about money anymore. You want to lose it. You stuff cash into the slots as fast as it will go, and even as you're doing it you now it's hopeless.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. William Ian Miller (1997) *Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge, Mass.; Max Nordau (1993) *Degeneration*. Lincoln, NE.

<sup>14</sup> R.H. Charles, Archdeacon of Westminster, quoted in J. Halliday and P. Fuller (1974) *The Psychology of Gambling*, London: 68

<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin (1999) *The Arcades Project*. See Convolute O14, 4: 515. He also comments, "by constantly raising the stakes, in the hopes of getting back what is lost, the gambler steers toward absolute ruin." It is not money that is 'lost' I would suggest, but rather the experience of pure being. This is what has to be replayed, and money is simply the means that allows this.

<sup>16</sup> Steven and Frederick Barthelme (2000) *Double Down*, Boston: 67.



The shock-engendered experience is also like a death; the gambler visits the demise of the self as the autonomous subject – only to return again, the revenant. What connection between the subject and the world can now be left; what now is ‘reality’?

This is ‘cursed traffic,’ in the language of moral condemnation. These Las Vegas degenerates are modern day Babylonians caught up in the interminable agitation of disordering confusion – they are slippery, intemperate, and preoccupied with a private universe in which time and space are denied. The turbulence of the gambling situation delivers the subject as a shadow of the autonomous ideal, a mere caricature of civilized humanity. In this fall from goodness, which approximates, in the end, to an idea like that of hell, it makes no difference how one takes reality, whether we acquiesce in it, or scorn it, because it is after all an infinite game of chance to the gambler.<sup>17</sup>

Henry Chafetz, in an entertaining history of gambling in America, tells of preachers prophesying that the Lord would one day settle accounts with the gamblers. On one particular day it appeared that the time had finally come:

At 2.15am on December 16, 1811, it seemed the preachers were right. The earth trembled and the houses were knocked off their foundations all through the valley. Honest men shivered, but the black legs showed a deplorable lack of interest in divine displeasure and the Lord’s display of anger. One god-fearing gent dashed into a Louisville gambling hell and shouted, ‘Gentlemen! How can you be engaged in this way when the world is so near its end?’ The gamblers reluctantly looked up and one of them softly commented, ‘What a pity that so beautiful a world should be destroyed!’<sup>18</sup>

Exhibiting a preoccupation with pleasure, gambling was still seen for a long time (and still is to some extent), together with a host of ‘sins of the flesh’ that contributed to the erosion of the soul as well as the body. Thus if men did not have the capacity to exert a power over themselves, the preachers and moralists warned, they were inadvertently willing an invitation to eternal damnation.<sup>19</sup> Far from being dependable, or predictable,

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. J-L Borges, *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Chafetz, *ibid.*: 50

<sup>19</sup> In early modern times, as Piero Camporesi tells us, this ‘other country’ was described as proportionate to earthly overindulgences, meeting them with a “hell of the five senses.” It is interesting to bring together the 17<sup>th</sup> century view of a state of anarchy as visualized by Hobbes, and which propels him to permit the legislation of sovereign power to cease the infernal motion of men without a notion of society, and to place it next to Baroque views of hell. “[...] no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no Commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” (*Leviathan*, Ch. 13) What Hobbes saw as the condition of life in the 17<sup>th</sup> century only needed to be further intensified in death, carried on into



or trustworthy, this man, the gambler in search of ‘the juice,’ slips out of reach and is never what, or where, you expect him to be: shifty, rootless and suspended between destinations; now you see him, now you don’t.<sup>20</sup> As ‘loosened’ movement, gambling hurtles towards the final full stop ever faster – but the problem is that there is no resolution.

### *A Profane Transubstantiation*

Yet, a ceaseless and potentially destructive motion of another sort matches the dissolution threatened by gambling (Plate 9). We know that life is movement, but the peculiar thing about gambling is how well it is actually suited to modern life. The fleeting nature of the wager, for example, is matched by the impermanence of social and economic relations in modern society. Beneath the surface of the everyday, there is ceaseless movement of another sort, because to everything in modern society there is attached a latent motive power, and because of this nothing stands still.

Money, as the universal *equivalent*, possesses the capacity to become anything, to move anywhere, and to facilitate the exchange of entirely unrelated goods. What, indeed, could be more impermanent? Money has none of the Lockean primary qualities that permit the identification of appearances, it is thus timeless, formless, and in constant transformation. Insofar as it makes sense to describe something so elusive, so non-objective, as *anything*, we might say that money may be considered as the universal and concrete form of possibility. Certainly, we can analyze money tautologically: one-pound sterling is one hundred pence; one dollar is one hundred cents, and so on. But this tells us nothing. The truth is, as Marx saw, that money is neither one specific thing, nor another; it is, rather, more curious in its power – it is a “magic thing,” possessed of occult powers.<sup>21</sup> It is “the Philosopher’s Stone the alchemists have sought in vain.”<sup>22</sup> It

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eternity in Hell. Thus, Jacques-Paul Migne, quoted by Piero Camporesi: “Unbearable thirst, the punishment of hunger, of stench, of horror, of fear, of want, of darkness, the cruelty of tortures, the presence of demons, the ferocity of wild beasts, the cruelty of attendants, the rending by undying worms, pain without alleviation, bonds without release, eternal death, punishment without end, the absence of Christ after beholding him.” See P. Camporesi (1991) *The Fear of Hell*, Pennsylvania: 6.

<sup>20</sup> See Reith (1999): 86, for the source of the phrase ‘this cursed traffic’ in relation to gambling.

<sup>21</sup> Quotes from Karl Marx (1954) *Capital*, London: 96 and 152. In chapter two, Marx claims the development of money can be found in ‘Nomad races’ because ‘all their worldly goods consist of moveable objects and are therefore directly alienable’ (92).

<sup>22</sup> See Christof Asendorf (1993) *Batteries of Life: On the History of Things and Their Perception in Modernity*. 30.





PLATE 9. SINS OF THE FLESH. Gambling has been seen for a long time as a sign of degeneration. More often in the past than in the present it was placed alongside other 'sins of the flesh.' This is a woodcut by a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Swiss artist, Urs Graf. The woman is giving her husband's money to her lover (right); the gambling equipment (backgammon and cards) adds to the scene's immorality. The motto below says: "Think of the end, that is my advice: for everything ends in death." From Alan Wykes, 1964, *Gambling*, London.



can be everything and nothing for a brief period, but always changes into something else.

The modern market economy demands, as well, that the change never ends, that money be kept in circulation providing, for the body social, the same effect as the blood that courses through the veins of the corporeal body. If everyone decided to settle for compound interest instead of engaging in acts of exchange, or ceased consuming goods and services, then the economy would grind to a halt.<sup>23</sup> Gambling looks like a market gone mad, but of course this is only so in terms of the features of gambling that are external to the singular experience of the wager; which is to say that the fact that a lot of money is pushed around should not mislead us. More interesting than it being compared to a market is that somewhere like Las Vegas, as some kind of gambling ideal, can so easily be viewed as kind of hell.

The speed with which money circulates in a gambling environment attains a new level of acceleration, which means that it never actually becomes anything for most of the time. It remains, in a sense, constantly suspended and never realizing any distinct form that is transferable to a non-gambling situation. The absence of readily analyzable exchange equivalents provides a heightened awareness of the unreality of the situation. Steven and Frederick Barthelme observe that when standing in a casino with ten thousand dollars in hand it was no longer even the embodiment of value, as conventionally understood. Instead it was “just playing time, time at the table or in front of the slots.”<sup>24</sup> That the gambler can be caught up in a violently destructive spiral perhaps only becomes evident on reflection of just how lacking in any definite properties money can become inside a casino, especially when contrasted with the perception of money in ‘normal’ life. “At home,” as David Thomson says:

You do much of your marketing on some kind of credit system that turns into paper records. Yet, when you gamble, in the speed and excitement of the action at the tables, there is no accounting, no paper trail.<sup>25</sup>

Exchange, as understood by classical economics simply does not take place because money is not transformed into anything. It is simply suspended as the token of the

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<sup>23</sup> Arguably under free market conditions. In the rhetoric of economists the management of the modern market economy is largely concerned with defeating inflation. This rests, it seems, on attaining a balance between peoples' spending and saving – too much of either and the whole edifice is under threat.

<sup>24</sup> F. & S. Barthelme, *ibid*: 85.



gambler's hopes, these also suspended. The fact that no new form is assumed, that no exchange of commodities takes place, means that there is now nothing to slow down the movement of money. To the gambler, the ceaseless motion of money acts as a counterpoint to the subjective experience of the wager (which, of course, need not involve money or commodities). It simply persists as the possibility of transformation, as found in the 'juice,' which may be terrible or wonderful, or an explosion of both sensations.

The modern casino takes things even further in terms of injecting an element of unreality to events. Through some muted transubstantiation money is reborn as the gambling chip, further blurring realities. "A hundred dollars is a lot of money," Steven and Frederick Barthelme write:

Think of it outside the casino and it translates into lots of things, lots of goods and services consuming – shirts, dinners, hamburgers, movie tickets, tire repairs, shots for the dogs or cats, computer software, sets of bed sheets. But in the casino it was a single bill. In chips it was one black. One.

So insubstantial is the chip that "it looked like it didn't have a chance of anything but a dance into the dealer's rack."<sup>26</sup> The chip now becomes the ultimate symbol of the unreality of the situation, and merely formalizes the abstractness that the gambler had always seen in money, and which was, for example, described by Dostoevsky's Alexei in *The Gambler*: "In a daze, I pushed all that pile onto the red, but then I suddenly came to my senses. Cold fear ran down my spine and made my hands and legs tremble."<sup>27</sup> The lack of distinction in the 'pile' of money, the sense that it would be wagered no matter what it amounted to, is almost matched by the ridiculousness of a jackpot payout that has no commensurability with the amount staked; for one dollar and one pull of the arm on a slot machine, you could win a million. This, the Barthelme's say, often amounts to a kind of joke: "When people hit a jackpot first they laugh, then they scream [...] this money just fell on you and it makes no sense. It's as nonsensical as love or cancer."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> David Thomson (1999) *In Nevada*, London: 221.

<sup>26</sup> F. & S. Barthelme, *ibid*: 84. Although not able to partake of a similar smorgasbord of consumables Karl Marx – in attempting to explain that all money was ultimately reducible to labour-time (and perhaps as a consequence of his frequent visits to the pawnbroker with the family linen) – famously wrestled with the insubstantiality of money as value: "any commodity considered as universal equivalent, consists of an infinite series of equations such as – 1 yard of linen = 2lbs. of coffee; 1 yard of linen = ½lb. of tea; 1 yard of linen = 8lbs. of bread; 1 yard of linen = 6 yards of calico; 1 yard of linen = and so on." See K. Marx (1970) *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, London: 46.

<sup>27</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky (1981) *The Gambler*, New York: 144.

<sup>28</sup> F. & S. Barthelme, *ibid*: 92.



Las Vegas merely takes the transformation seen in money to extremes; in fact it extends into the actual physical structure of the place, which itself never remains static for long, as beyond the gaming tables frequent visitors will observe the city morphs into an ever more fantastic dream world. Las Vegas is life as continual movement writ large.<sup>29</sup> Buildings are ripped apart and replaced with new palaces of sin at alarming speed. The erosion of normal social relations and expectations does not end with gambling and architecture. In fact, Las Vegas presents itself as a panacea for all the modern 'ills' of normality. Unhappy? Get married immediately. Or, alternatively get divorced faster than anywhere else will allow. But of course, there appears to be little chance that such instant gratification can match the rush felt on winning or losing a fortune in an instant – the possibility of a momentarily transformation (that becomes mistaken for an eternal transformation) still provides the foundation for the rest of the pleasures on offer.

Beyond the extremity of Las Vegas there has also been a historical change in perceptions. The most notable thing about gambling now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century is how commonplace it is everywhere in modern societies, how available the means for gambling are, and how little it is scorned. It is interesting to note how Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, composed as recently as the first half of the last century, threw gambling together with prostitution, and how far this is from what is now generally thought about gambling, so 'de-profaned' has it become in certain forms. One only has to think of pictures of Irish nurses from less than fifty years ago (Plate 10), drawing the numbers for the national sweepstake in their clean starched uniforms, appearing as if nothing but a representation of goodness itself, as a cure for all ills. And to see that in the cause of goodness this 'contagious distemper' as one irate moralist<sup>30</sup> described gambling has now had its essential destructiveness concealed by the way in which it has been marshaled to meet some social and financial deficit, that it has become to an extent accepted in certain forms as 'normal.'

The gradual assimilation of gambling in modern society, however, conceals the whiff of danger that will always be attached to an activity that has the potential to become totally disordered. To some pulpit moralists preaching damnation, gambling is

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. F. Anderton and J. Chase (1997) *Las Vegas: A Guide to Recent Architecture*, London. As the authors explain, the impermanence of constructions in Las Vegas can also be seen in the fact that no single architect is ever associated with these buildings. They are the anonymous architects of unglamorous firms that would never assume to bequeath something permanent – their job is just to keep coming up with more spectacular buildings.

<sup>30</sup> See Henry Chafetz, *ibid*: 38.





PLATE 10. GOOD HEALTH. The Irish hospitals sweepstake was established in 1930 to raise money for hospitals. The 'Sweeps' as it was known, was only legal in Ireland, although it sought to circumvent restrictions on advertising abroad — particularly in the United States — by the use of promotional gimmicks, as John Scarne notes: "One of the most effective [...] was the floating ashore along our Atlantic coast of a great many fish-shaped bottles, each containing a paper entitling the finder to a drink of his choice at any tavern and asking him to drink to good luck in the Irish Sweepstakes. See John Scarne, 1974, *Scarne's New Complete Guide to Gambling*. There is an irony, of course, in these six nurses — guardians of good health — encouraging what, by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and thanks to the influence of the Churches' Council on Gambling in the United Kingdom, was regarded as thoroughly dissolute behaviour. It seems, however, that Ireland had for some time diverged from the more Protestant Britain where gambling was concerned. In 1924 the Archdeacon of Westminster wrote: "In the Roman Churches lotteries are a recognized means of procuring funds for religious purposes. In the southern provinces of Ireland this evil is [...] wholly unrestrained [...] in a raffle organized on behalf of a religious institution before the establishment of the Free State the prizes included a cameo of Leo XIII specially presented by the Pope himself." See J. Halliday and P. Fuller, 1974, *The Psychology of Gambling*: 71. The photograph is by Derrick O. Michelson, 1961.



taken for dissolution; as a manifestation of uncontrollable movement it is a vice. And to modern medical science, it is taken as an ‘illness,’ which is to say, a controllable yet insidious reminder of the dangers of disordered physical and psychological movement.

This, too, brings us back to the centrality of *motion* to our whole understanding of gambling. The moral and medical condemnation of gambling seems to come from the fact that it reveals a lack of definite habits, an absence of strong movements that, in privileging safety, follow the steps of previous lives (perhaps our own lives), routinely wearing orderly and reasonable paths on the landscape. Like the line that bisects a normal curve, the orderly path appropriately avoids deviations to left and right, and acts as a guard against excess and defect. The cursed traffic of deviations from the norm makes reality dubious for the gambler seeking ‘the juice’ and once the wager thus ‘claims’ the gambler, the potential for disorder is all too clear, as the Barthelme brothers note, in a kind of wagering that speculates on an alternative reality:

A gambler feels a powerful rush of vindication in winning, but it’s not about beating the casino or the blackjack dealer or the slot machine. It’s not even really about beating money. It’s about beating logic. It’s about chance confirming everything you knew but could make no place for in your life.<sup>31</sup>

The gambler effectively pushes rational autonomy to the limit because chance contradicts the counsels of rational freedom. In the examples I have looked at (which are extreme cases of gambling and loss) the players move far from rational or social constraints upon action, but crucially they do this from within such constraints. It is the fact that these gamblers emerge *from* society, from a given set of social relations, that makes the activity so contingent in a radical sense; it has its root in what we now refer to as the ‘normal’ – yet it is radically contingent in a further sense, and that is because the destructive spiral the activity may begin (equally, it may not) can be without limit. Gambling thus presents in one form the *potential* of rational autonomy as the freedom of self-creation to realise itself, but also necessarily as the source of a socially destructive impulse that constitutes part of what freedom can contribute to its own destruction. I have merely attempted here (taking a value neutral position to the subject) to gain new insights into why the nature of the wager ensures that disorder will always ensue, and that pushed to the limit, so will destruction.

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<sup>31</sup> F. & S. Barthelme, *ibid*: 97.



TWO

## RESIDUE

Modern painting, like modern thought generally, obliges us to admit a truth which does not resemble things, which is without any external model and without any predestined instruments of expression, and which is nevertheless truth.

MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY, *Signs*



Refinement is an effect of differentiation, an act that selects and relates in experience the elements of a phenomenal world, turning the act into a creative *making* of the world. Thus, refinement is cause and consequence of judgement, the interaction that produces differentiation.

Often, it seems that a distillation of phenomenal experience separates a domain of aesthetic existence from the rational utility that otherwise orders the objects of the world. Thus, refinement organises experience into the graceful and the gauche, the tasteful and the kitsch. Refinement separates, withdraws, and distills a sphere of value from the crudity of existence, which itself remains, in terms of our knowledge of it, inexact or random in its natural condition.

The pull of attraction that guides us towards certain appearances, or certain objects, makes little sense without some idea that in looking at the world we are guided by notions of familiarity and difference, and in this respect, we cannot overlook the role knowledge plays in helping us to identify phenomena – to discern and thus refine a visual ordering of experience. To look at the world, to visualize the beauty or symmetry in things, in their relations, is to make a mask-like appearance. And so, looking is also an act of revision, or editing.

However, in ‘discerning’ the well-proportioned order that we give phenomena, and which produces the aesthetic realm, we groom a finely nuanced existence that conceals awareness that refinement also produces a necessary residue. In fact, the hidden byproduct of refinement reveals, if seen, the discreteness of phenomena – that the residual elements constitute a jumble of inexactness.



Reason, too, proceeds by refining knowledge, which is seen in the separation of phenomena into ever more particular elements, which in combination constitute the world of appearance as we understand it. In modern physics the world of appearance is theoretically resolved – by an act of refinement, no less – into a world of discretely moving, yet hidden particulars; undermining the notion that the world of phenomena are related in the way our visual ordering privileges the regularity in appearance. We proceed, however, on the basis that what we do picture in looking at the world does bear some resemblance to ‘reality’ – but this is only to the reality produced by the snapshot effect of looking, which as I say, filters phenomena into a meaningful visual and conceptual field.

In modern society the plastic arts can be seen as a particular concentration of the activity that becomes manifest in a *world-moulding*, one that sees reason effectively derive the bounds of the sensible, thus separating the random. Artists, particularly those of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have taken refinement to the non-place of the *residual*, to the impoverished material world of objects that were distilled from a prior existential grooming; the aesthetic is, thus, overturned by the artist who takes up residence in the very notion of plasticity. This is the realm of the impermanent, the protean, the fluid, the unpredictable and the confusing.

Nevertheless, we know that from coarse matter great riches are mined: from the depths of the sea, oil and its triumphant byproduct, plastic. It is fitting that plastic – the garbage of oil refinement – becomes the material of modern life *par excellence*; capable of assuming constantly renewed forms, it is the source of great value that, by analogy, describes at once the impermanence of much art from the 20<sup>th</sup> century art, and its origins in the crude, meaningless world of disorder.



## 6 Indivisible Particulars

The transition from the 'possible' to the 'actual' takes place during the act of observation. If we want to describe what happens in an atomic event, we have to realize that the word 'happens' can apply only to the observation.

WERNER HEISENBERG, *Physics and Philosophy*

In a series of lectures delivered in 1955 and 1956, the physicist Werner Heisenberg delivered a simple and eloquent view of the world that encapsulated the revolutionary reassessment of matter, motion and objectivity that had developed in the scientific world view over the previous half-century or so. The world, he explained, was comprised of an infinite number of quanta, of indivisible atomic particles, whose properties we could only determine somewhat arbitrarily, it seemed, by specific observations and at a definite time. That is to say, the new science of the physical world suggested that our understanding of physical reality is delivered by a sensory 'freezing' of a constantly variable and indeterminate underlying motion. Experience creates or makes a 'picture' of the phenomenal world from a kind of snapshot that realises some aspect of this quantum world – although the variable motion of these atoms that compose the whole, the indivisible particulars, remain unseen; the world we describe thus metaphorically masks the imperceptible, and this mask fits, indeed it is all there is. In the quantum picture no phenomena are *real* until these are observed phenomena, which is to say *until we make it an object of experience*.<sup>1</sup>

The significant feature of this understanding of the physical world is not just that experience resolves particular elements into a 'picture,' but that this will differ from 'picture' to 'picture.' In other words, there is no once and for all good fit that unifies observation and quantum phenomena in an immutable reality.

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<sup>1</sup> Pagels, Heinz R. (1982) *The Cosmic Code: Quantum Physics as the Language of Nature*, New York: Chapter five.



*Knowledge and Language*

Whilst one should hesitate to suggest that the language of theoretical physics could be clumsily transferred, wholesale, to another kind of discourse, to our understanding of aspects of human action, there is nonetheless a compelling analogy. In fact, because language, by which I mean concepts and ideas as well as the spoken word, is the mediator that delivers – that makes communicable – all knowledge, we must acknowledge the fact that scientific views of the nature of physical reality, and the language through which we have understood this, have always reflected philosophical notions of humanity as occupying a particular position as regards some physical *ordering* of the universe.<sup>2</sup> Indeed the world as described by quantum mechanics is only understood to be determined as the result of human ‘interfering.’

Like the Berkelian denial of the external ‘reality’ of the world, which brought attention back to the perceiving subject, Werner Heisenberg’s elaboration of the conditions of the quantum universe works, by separating mind from matter, by refocusing our attention on the subject as well, and thus specifically ‘locates’ the contingency of our *knowledge* of the world on the conditions of the apprehension of reality, on the fact that that the human subject (as autonomous reason) is what actually connects the two – mind and world – and in such a mediating role establishes the identity that is realised in the varieties of autonomous action.<sup>3</sup> This is a radical reformulation of a logocentric way of looking at the world, which has been carried through Western philosophical, theological and aesthetic traditions.<sup>4</sup>

Logocentrism insists on the existence of a separate and coherent reality that is apprehended by reason. The full extent of the coherence of this reality is only attained by reason overcoming obstacles to understanding, in rectifying conceptual flaws, or by

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Alexander Koyré (1957) *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, Baltimore. Koyré gives an account of the replacement of a world view that saw man as a spectator of nature (derived from the Aristotelian conception of space which viewed the world as a hierarchy of perfection) being replaced by a new world view that stressed man as owner and master of nature. See also Thomas Kuhn’s (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago), which also explores the relationship between conceptions of reality and the place of humanity in the cosmos.

<sup>3</sup> Berkeley did not deny that the world exists, of course, just that it does not exist as we picture it without any activity on our part. See George Berkeley (1980) *Philosophical Works*, London. Even if one denies such idealist notions, it seems impossible to bridge the Cartesian gap between mind and matter, or subject and object, in any kind of identification that does not, as I discuss below with reference to Donald Davidson, rest on particular statements; on the nature of language as the obstacle that creates this gulf. Having said that, I don’t regard this as a problem – rather we sidestep the problematic historical nature of this, which has characterised philosophy ever since Descartes, by accepting that singular statements of identity, or what philosophers of language examine as ‘descriptions’ hold true either because they are acceptable within a discourse that finds accord within a community (such as the language of science that Thomas Kuhn, *ibid*, discusses), or because in operational terms these ‘descriptions’ *work* in practically allowing us to find our way through life; they permit action, in other words.



attaining the correct method to produce such a revelation of the true. The seventeenth century English philosopher John Locke expressed the role of such a method in a very basic and interesting way. In an ‘epistle’ to the general reader of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of 1690 he suggested that reason was analogous to a pathway that takes us forward from someplace familiar to somewhere perhaps yet to be discovered, but the problem for the human understanding was that the pathway of reason was littered with obstacles to the desired destination of understanding. The obstacles to knowledge were, thus, in his words ‘rubbish’; and so it is that by clearing away these disconnected fragments of speculative reason, by removing that which cannot be subsumed under a current understanding, that we find the way.<sup>5</sup>

A proper method would therefore bring an order to things; it would establish the categories of understanding that could then allow us to discern a regularity in phenomena. Furthermore, regularity necessitated, it seemed, not just the removal of rubbish but also of the fearful natural wonders that were found as exceptions to what was believed to be the inherent determinism of nature.<sup>6</sup> This view of nature as an independently existing ‘true channel of Naturall Causes and Effects’ [*sic*] was until the quantum revolution, the basis of most ordinary knowledge of the natural world.

The Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, which Heisenberg was instrumental in delivering and which finally saw the new scientific view gain acceptance, released the grip of the classical view of the physical world, the basis of which Heisenberg found in what he saw as becoming entrenched in what he called the “Cartesian partition” under which it was stated that matter exists independently of the conditions under which it is viewed.<sup>7</sup> The classical view of an independent and deterministic nature was thus changed from a view of the world “having the

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<sup>4</sup> See Mark C. Taylor (1992) *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, and Religion*, Chicago: 188-89.

<sup>5</sup> Although Locke was skeptical of reason attaining the capacity to reveal knowledge of what he called ‘real essences’ he did believe that our ideas of ‘primary qualities’ (e.g., size, shape, motion, etc.) give us an acceptable representation of the world around us. He believed that if our senses were more acute we could have knowledge of the essential constitution of things (*Essay* II xxxi 6 and IV iii 25), although this knowledge was out of reach (*Essay* IV iii 10-14), and so we have at best *probability* and not *knowledge*. Yet we have “an assurance that deserves the name of knowledge” that there are external objects (*Essay* IV xi 3), even if our knowledge of them is limited.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen R.L. Clark quotes an eminent man of letters, Thomas Sprat, first historian of the Royal Society, who summed up the gradual triumph of science in the following words: “The cours of things goes quietly along, in its own true channel of Natural Causes and Effects. For this we are beholden to Experiments; which though they have not yet completed the discovery of the true world, yet they have already vanquished those wild inhabitants of the false world, that us’d to astonish the minds of men.” See Clark in A. Kenny (1994) *Oxford Illustrated History of Western Philosophy*. London: 7. On these wonders of such a ‘false world’ see Lorriane Daston and Katherine Park (1997) *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*. New York.



determinism of a clock to having the contingency of a pinball machine.”<sup>8</sup> Contingency is thus a ‘property’ of the indeterminacy of our *knowledge* of how the atomic particles of this universe interact. We are inextricably ensnared within this quantum universe, and once this is known there is no way to free ourselves from the implication that the nature of being is, too, contingent.

Everything we do, or think, or produce, becomes understood through a world thus constituted; in other words the world we *make* is made under the conditions of the state of our knowledge at any given time and place, which is to say cannot be other than variable. In his lectures Heisenberg was giving a summary of modern physics in the preceding half-century to say something about the bounds of knowledge. From Max Planck’s problem of Black Body Radiation – the theory that objects were composed of discrete moving subatomic particles, to his own Indeterminacy theory and Niels Bohr’s principle of complementarity – that the momentum and position of these particles cannot both be precisely determined at the same time, Heisenberg was telling us what we could say about the quantum world given these developments; that we could only make a probabilistic determination of knowledge.

### *Atomisation and the Arts in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

By the second or third decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a revolution had overtaken thinking about the nature of the visual arts that was comparable in its consequences. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the objective or realist orthodoxy in art had been under attack. The orthodox view in art – representationalism – might be taken to be similar to the classical world view of nature in that the properties of a world understood in these terms was deemed to be separate from our perception of it; in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the world that the language of art described was finally atomized, just as was the case with the revolution in physics.

Now, the eye of the viewer was taken to be a primary condition of the making of the object *as a work of art*.<sup>9</sup> The act of ‘picturing’ was thus strangely akin to the act in which Heisenberg said we could describe an atomic event as something that ‘happens’ – the event was actually the consequence of the specific conditions of time, place and

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<sup>7</sup> Werner Heisenberg (1989) *Physics and Philosophy*, Harmondsworth: 43. Philosophical realism is, of course, as old as philosophy itself.

<sup>8</sup> Heinz Pagels, *ibid*: 85.



observer, and thus constituted in the famous phrase of Marcel Duchamp, a kind of rendezvous.

The move away from the representation of external realities, of objects and phenomena within visual and conceptual grasp, and thus from an objective apprehension of the world and a collection of properties that was at once recognisable, and also meaningful, that admitted of identification, was a move towards the erosion of any basis for objective identification. Antoine Compagnon in *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity* dates this break to Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* of 1863, and the impact of its self-conscious upsetting of conventional representational signifiers, and particularly in its use of previously symbolic forms, in this case the nude, taken out of context.<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida too, saw a similar disconnection in the work of Cezanne, and this he pointedly claims suggests that the art object is itself a speculative stab at being. "The phenomena 'in' Cezanne's paintings (fruit, his wife, the Monte Sainte-Victoire, and so on)," do not exist as such:

What would traditionally be called 'content,' and each painting as a whole, are re-presentations of or metaphors for relationality itself, that is, for the possibility that there are no 'things-in-themselves' but only phenomena constituted in, through and as specific relations.<sup>11</sup>

From the beginning of the twentieth century, then, the apparent retreat of art into an increasingly radical subjectivity on the part of the painter was accompanied by what we might call the indivisibility of subjective perceptions of the work of art. That is to say, ranging from developments in representational methods that utilised non-realistic colouring, through the increasing development of abstraction to the final arrival of conceptual art, the object, in much the same way as the atomic event, only exists, and the object is only given the status of being as a condition of the intervention of a viewer, because in the strictly objective terms of realism many of these objects appeared to be devoid of meaning.

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<sup>9</sup> This is discussed in more detail in the following three chapters.

<sup>10</sup> Antoine Compagnon (1994) *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity*, New York: xiii-xviii.

<sup>11</sup> The passage continues: "And this is to say that, at the level of specific marks themselves, the site or surface where significance emerges, the 'place' at which our gaze is directed, the conjunction of eyes and surface, is the space that is no space between two or more adjacent marks. This absent space, the space that we experience as a gap while knowing it always to be a space both created and repressed by the very adjacency of the brushstrokes themselves, is the space through which we are pulled toward the differing – deferring work of the 'trace' itself – 'différance'." Derrida, *Positions*, London: 28. Quoted in Michael Phillipson (1985) *Painting, Language and Modernity*, London: 56.



The inevitability of this atomisation is found in the fact that ordinary visual experience makes sense of the world much in the way that classical physics understood the natural world: we notice and record regularity, or in other words the constant conjunction of phenomena that marks appearances, rather than the experiencing the imperceptible atomic structure. The exception to such a *visual* ordering of phenomena into a meaningful world is evident, for example, in the non-representational nature of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and this too hinted at something imperceptible in the sense that it was easy to imagine that something was missing in objects that had no referent in the ‘real’ world.

Artists had increasingly, since the previous century, abandoned the restrictions of visual realism to instead present the viewer with *an idea*, or a puzzle that by its own ambiguity hinted at the notion of a discretely composed reality. Where this happened art vacated the ground that reason, and the language of empiricism, had declared to be the foundation of all meaningful communication. Instead, it was the concentration on the relation of viewer and object that would permit the language of subjective experience to bridge the “Cartesian partition” as Heisenberg called it.<sup>12</sup> Meaningful communication was to become a discourse between artist and viewing public with what the artist ‘declared’ in the work – given the obvious ambiguity this could involve – being the new focus of the work, rather than the lack of such a question, which might have been the standard response to the more or less unambiguous objects of representationalism.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century therefore visual art made a definitive move away from *representing* the world, to the position where it was overtly involved in *making* a world; a move that went from basically saying what the world was, to an uncertain discourse over what we could say about the world.

### *History, Rubbish and Language*

There may be many aspects to our understanding of the contingency of the world we represent. However the elaboration of an atomized world is usually either historically or conceptually related to various ways of giving an account of being. Firstly, there is a historicist view that identifies a whole series of ‘historical contingencies’ as evidence of the fallibility of reason and civilisation; that seeks ultimately to understand human

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<sup>12</sup> See Phillipson, *ibid*: 36.



history in terms of a more or less orderly procession, beset by frequent setbacks. This is one way of creating a picture of the world by assembling a host of discrete elements.

There is also an understanding of the contingent that would encompass this, and which also sheds some light on why the elaboration of something as curiously tautologous as a notion of ‘historical contingency’ that fails to see in history just a special case of knowledge, and that perhaps sees it as some autonomous *procession*.

We can see in notions of subjectivity and autonomy the ‘atomization’ of the social as both a condition and a consequence of modern society; in subjectivity we are indivisible particulars, whilst in autonomy our actions are recognised as particular examples of a general characteristic, the rational. The ‘social atom’ realises the combination of these two properties, and allows us to see the development of modern society as a response to the philosophical conviction of the irreconcilable differences that would likely beset a world of such ‘indivisible particulars.’ The root of this philosophical development, however, lies in the difficulty language and understanding have in coping with change as anything but a disordering exception to some ‘normal’ course of events, or a calamitous rupture that could only have adverse consequences for order, which of course, demands that things *stop moving*.

In the earliest modern attempts to give philosophical grounds that would account for the inability of reason to discern causes, or in social terms to observe the origin of human movement – the *internal motions* – as Hobbes called them, we find a concern to overcome this by the creation of a world that obeys what in all its limitations sense tells us it is; that, in other words, the conditions could be created for making what is observable the basis all knowledge, and thus for the understanding of social relations. Thus, whilst bodies can be observed in motion, we can do no more than assume that what we see is the movement of a rational actor – and hence, taking this to some logical conclusion by elaborating the conditions where external constraints would *solicit* rational action, which is also to determine the conditions where action might agree with some real and objective state of affairs.

Hobbes built his entire social philosophy on this fact because he was trying to figure out how humanity could be made explicable as nature had been; how could we understand what the workings of the human world given these hidden *internal motions*. In *Leviathan*, his masterpiece of 1651, Thomas Hobbes understood that one way to make known the indeterminate ‘nature’ of humanity was to break it down into pieces



and to give these *names* and from this point would begin the construction of the entire edifice of society. It is because the contingent must be understood as an effect of a knowledge so founded that we are compelled to draw an analogy between the quantum physics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Hobbes' more or less nominalistic making of the world; in History too that world is made no less than it was by philosophers like Hobbes, and it is made because language needs a meaningful discourse.<sup>13</sup>

### *Non-Linear History*

What was undoubtedly shared in the history of modernity across these different discourses was the idea that both the arts and the sciences could be determined by the belief that humanity would ultimately take control of an unruly nature and bend it to the desires of the human will; and this, as we saw, precisely because reason could reveal the inner workings of nature, which once discovered would then be presented as the relations between phenomena that are the foundation of knowledge. Or by extension the relations between phenomena found, for example, represented on the canvas of a painting.

However, this is not to dismiss history, or the progress that has surpassed the aims of the Enlightenment. What needs to be remembered, however, is that History with a capital 'H' is not some autonomous procession that reason merely drops in on, or that we discern by peaking through some curtain that is drawn across a cinemascopic picture, so as to see 'the past' – it is rather that History is an effect of knowledge. So, there are things we know; things that have made a marked difference to the way lives now are lived as compared to 100, 200, or 300 years ago.

History places before us a continuous development of reason that in the relative rapidity of its progress might explain why the metaphysical language we have inherited, which is evident in the way language is forced to make an object of the world, and the uneasy relationship this language has to a present that is continuously unfolding, is still the subject of philosophical disputes today. There is no doubt that experience understands in history a distance that has been compressed by a forward movement, and no less by the erasure of past. In little more than 300 years, therefore, we have gone from

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<sup>13</sup> By which I mean that the good stuff is just as historically contingent as the bad. Usually, however, the contingent is seen as the various departures from some linear narrative, which is always striving for perception. This is a perception that is also inherited from the logocentric tradition.



the centrality of philosophical doubt over the existence of a world external to the mind, to a refinement of knowledge that permitted the discovery of new worlds. We might put this in more prosaic terms: with respect to the application of our understanding of the nature of the physical world, of space and time, we have gone from horsepower to rocket power. To illustrate the relative speed with which this has taken place, and how far the metaphysics of language lags behind, we can still understand the latter in terms of the former, although the relation does not really work very well in the opposite direction; the number of horsepower required for space flight makes the comparison somewhat superfluous – to say a horse equals something like one twenty-millionth of a space shuttle sounds rather absurd.<sup>14</sup>

But the progress evident in subsequent scientific and technological triumphs attest to the massive advances made between the seventeenth-century and the twentieth-century: the growing circulation of knowledge in printed form; the industrialization of the process of production, the institution of education for the masses, being just three examples of a progress that allowed reason to assume a position of dominance over most aspects of nature.

The effect of this refinement was also found however in the visible evidence of ‘residual’ social phenomena that contradicted the idea of a neat, smooth, and linear progress. So whilst reason attained the status of *the way to truth*, or to the understanding and planning of the ‘proper’ functioning of society, by the mid nineteenth-century the consequences of rational advancements in making the world comprehensible, in scientific and social terms, were becoming apparent in conditions that stood as exceptions to universal progress. For example, the social blight of industrial society was contemporaneous with the development of the first mass produced flushing toilet; and in mechanized warfare which was assisted by the use of the same trains that allowed the compression of time and space in other circumstances. The point is that these are not *Historical* exceptions, contingencies, or the product of chance. These are the necessary conditions against which a new order can be determined, an order that is always comes from the old, is always overcoming the present state. However, in terms of the view of history as some linear procession towards some nirvana, the irony is that the standard

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Horsepower’ was a measure that was actually equivalent to one and one-third the actual power of a horse (OED), i.e., 550 foot-pounds per second, something that would have been comprehensible within recent memory.



bearer in this pageant, the autonomous subject, stands as a testament to the failure of reason to conquer nature; this is seen from the evidence of the unrestrained brute within as represented by the frequent descent of humanity into war.

### *Contingency and Knowledge*

The elements of modern life that signified exceptions to some rule reflected also the de-centering of the twin scientific claims of realism and objectivity. A marked awareness of the indeterminacy of events, natural and human, was matched by the realisation of the complexity of *human nature* – the human psyche, and consequently of the multiplicity of subjective perceptions and experiences which go to make up the new ‘reality’. This can sound platitudinous, but if we delve into the philosophical implications of modern empirical science we can see that it is knowledge and language that produce “the inevitable” – the contingencies ‘of’ history. However, as E.H. Carr said, “the facts are really not at all like fish on a fishmonger’s slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean.” They only end up there as the result of fishing in certain waters, and in virtue also of the use of a certain kind of net.<sup>15</sup> The problem of a historical understanding of the contingent, the problem I seek to confront here in these pages, cannot thus be separated from the problem of understanding what individuals get up to.

Donald Davidson projects our prospects for understanding the world of human experience and thus the procession of historical ‘events’ in terms of the way science understands the physical world. Not only can we have no firm knowledge of the causes of human action, we cannot even say that a certain attitude or a certain reason caused a person to act in a certain way. We can only describe what we see, what we understand:

There is no assigning beliefs to a person one by one on the basis of his verbal behaviour, his choices or other local signs no matter how plain and evident, for we make sense of particular beliefs only as they cohere with other beliefs, with preferences, intentions, hopes, fears, expectations, and the rest.<sup>16</sup>

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The space shuttle to use another example utilises something like 20,000,000 horsepower, which prompts the question of why we still employ such practically meaningless statements of the identity of otherwise separate phenomena.

<sup>15</sup> E.H. Carr (1961) *What is History?* Harmondsworth: 23.

<sup>16</sup> Donald Davidson (1980) ‘Mental Events,’ in *Essays on Actions and Events*. Oxford: 221.



This is where we return to Heisenberg's statement that the actual only takes place during observation; that what happened is in the telling ultimately. The world that is significant in sociological terms, in terms of human social action is explained by beliefs and desires, not merely because the imperceptible 'atomic' status of these 'internal motions' (beliefs and desires) allow us to make a neat connection between the human world and the quantum view of the physical world. It is rather because the assumption of autonomy that is characteristic of any speculation on the nature of modern society means that we build a great edifice from these very small beginnings: we assume that the movements of bodies in space, that social action let's say, is not the mechanical movement of undifferentiated parts of a larger whole, that social action, and that the manifestations of societal trends are rationally comprehensible.

So we can do no other but look at how our everyday language deals with these very small beginnings, the *ontological bases* of understanding. As we have seen the discourse of meaning finds problems in identifying exceptional individual action, a problem we have seen reflected in the actions of the gambler being designated 'disordered.' In what follows, we can also see that identity becomes a mask that adorns the surface we created to represent the world in artistic terms; that objects of art, like objects of knowledge about social action reveal only particular acts of 'picturing' reality, and that the infinity of meanings renders the subjective the provider of an indivisible identity.



## 7 Alchemy of the Word

What we call Dada is foolery, foolery extracted from the emptiness  
in which all the higher problems are wrapped, a gladiator's gesture, a game  
played with the shabby remnants...a public execution of false morality.

HUGO BALL

“If you are alive, you are a Dadaist,” Richard Huelsenbeck wrote in 1920. Huelsenbeck belonged to a group of poets, performers and visual artists, the Dadaists, who came together in Zurich during 1916. “Human beings,” he said, “are simply ideologues if they fall for the swindle perpetrated by their own intellects; that an idea, symbol of a momentarily perceived fact, has any absolute reality.”<sup>1</sup> Dada was not to be understood, he believed, but lived. It was life as play – immediate and obvious to the participant, but perhaps impenetrable to the observer. Ideas and meanings, it declared, only had purchase in specific places and times; or, put another way, art belonged to the space-time continuum.

The seemingly indivisible nature of sense-experience in and with relation to the objects of much art in the early part of the twentieth century, created some difficulties for notions of meaning and thus also the thorny problem of identity; and this precisely because the indivisible self stands in stark contrast to an apparently objective identity, one which mediates aesthetic experience. The latter form of identity, we might say, is concerned with correspondences between two or more distinct ‘objects.’ In other words, it relates physical or conceptual equivalents. On the other hand, identity of another kind, as a matter of subjectivity, declares the self a unique and indivisible entity; that is to say the subject is established not by relating an equivalent, but by differentiating self from other.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Huelsenbeck (ed.) (1993) *Dada Almanac*, London: 9-11.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Paul Ricoeur (1992) *Oneself as Another*. Chicago.



In the production of art, representation and mimesis had been, for millennia, the dominant tradition in the logocentric thinking of the western mind, and the question of 'meaning' was dealt with in visual arts, for example, by reference to a number of painterly conventions of representation.<sup>3</sup> Sometime in the last 150-200 years, however, the grip of these conventions upon artists became loosened, and eventually, by the time of the Copenhagen interpretation of the quantum world in the 1930's, totally broken; and like the developments of the Copenhagen physicists, it had produced a new way of coming to terms with existence. But before we jump that far forward, it is worth looking more closely at some artistic affinities, that although separated by the nature of their intent, reflected a coming to terms with the shifting grounds of experience and, thus, influenced a radical re-evaluation of the logos.

The communicability of meaning had always been problematic to an understanding of the world around us, but with the increasing mediation of more aspects of the experience of this world, and with the availability of contrasts with other ways of thinking about such matters (anthropology, for example, revealed the variability of beliefs about the nature of the physical world), the problem became so overbearing that cultural and intellectual reflexes directed the normally expansive curiosity of the Western mind inwards.<sup>4</sup> A retreat to safety, it seems, in an attempt to keep a grip on this problem of meaning.

In technical or formal terms this was reflected, for instance, by the inward turn taken by Anglo-American analytic philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century. Already, in fact, by the late 1890's, following Gottlob Frege's work on the sense and meaning of expressions, the idea of a tightly-conceived identity established on the basis of reference to an external object or item alone, came unstuck. In trying to make philosophy scientifically respectable the philosophers of the analytic school who followed Frege's lead, determined that, in language, every term must be unambiguous. It must have a reference, or put another way, words had to refer to one thing or another.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, E.H. Gombrich (1977) *Art and Illusion*, London; Erich Auerbach (1953) *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton; Norman Bryson (1983) *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, London; and Viktor I. Stoichita (1997) *A Short History of the Shadow*, London.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to suggest that self-reflection is unique to this period, merely, as I say in what follows that the dominant philosophy of the analytic school dealt with the irreconcilable problem of realism, by turning 'inward' to examine thought and language in a more thoroughgoing way than had been seen before, in the sense that this became the only viable role for philosophy.

<sup>5</sup> See Gottlob Frege, 'On Sense and Reference,' in Peter Geach and Max Black (1980)(eds.) *Translations From the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, Oxford.



Language problems, which therefore centered on problems of referentiality and identity, suppose an external 'reality' to which language use, and representations generally, be they linguistic or material, should match up.<sup>6</sup> Richard Rorty explained the basis of this problem by suggesting that what the realist picture ultimately cannot cope with is the idea that there may be nothing below the surface, or in other words, the *metaphors* that form such a large part of the representational practices do not have any meaning, and this, of course, is why the formalisation of language in a system of logic must dispense with metaphorical language.<sup>7</sup>

The problem does not end here however. Any consideration of meaning draws us back into a host of related, and seemingly insoluble, problems. Meaning, as a function of our capacity for identification, is, as we have seen, derived from, on the one hand, reference to some external object or phenomena (the meaning of which may be personal and subjective – a perspective that would be deemed meaningless by realist ontologies), and on the other, an agreement between observers as to what this object or phenomena that is external to us actually *is*. This is the same problem we encounter with identity, which as we have seen can be shown in two variants – identity by equivalence, and identity by differentiation. And so we can see why these difficulties only serve to bring under scrutiny the terms of the language that we use to describe this other thing, and that this produces an apparently unbridgeable chasm. In short, language, as the most fundamental mediator, in striving for identity creates the separation between self and world.

### *Recognition and Disguise*

Whilst the response of philosophers, in their language analysis, was to confine analysis to problems that could be elaborated on the grounds of the truth conditions of statements (that is, an analysis that was restricted to unambiguous statements), by the same time the arts grasped the problem of nature's novelty as revealed by the indeterminacy of language and put it under examination. What resulted, by contrast with the philosophical tightening of logic and language as the grounds of analysis, was a loosening of the word, a freeing-up of representational conventions, notions of identity,

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1968) *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford; Edmund Husserl (1970) *Logical Investigations*. London.

<sup>7</sup> See Richard Rorty (1989) *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, New York: 19



and effectively a kind of alchemy of identity as understood by logocentric traditions as part of the unity and order of nature, turned into a protean mask. What was really placed under scrutiny here, as historical developments made more apparent the discordance of nature, was the alienating experience produced by this gulf between self and world, which had been disguised by the recognition of meaning through the Kantian apparatus.

At the beginning of the twentieth century art sought to present the mutable nature of being and mediate it through the relativity of space-time. The Italian futurists – impetuous seekers of chaos – simply urged abandonment to the imperatives of a mechanized modern world. By contrast those associated with Dada, who through playing with chance, attempted a re-engagement with what they regarded as a “humiliating age” ravaged by war and materialism.<sup>8</sup> Dada, in some of its forms, retained a connection with artistic notions of responsibility for the presentation of the world; in contrast to the nihilism of Italian futurism, which urged a quickening at the expense of all else. Dada advocated a long and hard look at where the ideals of modernity had taken humanity; young men marching off to war with a volume of Goethe in their knapsacks. This, they took to be the ultimate debasement of language and art. For the Italian futurists on the other hand, modern urban life seemed to speak of the impossibility of anything as fixed as meaning and, hence, the veneration of speed and, of course, the consequent loosening of meaning from traditionally fixed categories.

Specifically by embracing the *dangerous* possibilities offered by technological advancement futurism diverged from the path followed by Dada. The love of speed was a way of hastening the destruction of the present, of progress in space-time realising an exhilarating cultural entropy. One thinks of Filippo Marinetti’s declared ‘dread of slowness’ accompanied as it was by a “love of speed, abbreviation, and the summary, *Quick, give me the whole thing in two minutes.*”<sup>9</sup> Tradition was abhorred, as with the Dadaists, but by contrast there was no suggestion of an alternative: the difference between the two can further be underlined by the futurist faith in war, and that that war was, in fact, like the futurist impulse itself, creative. It was an element of the immediate they so longed for, the broom that sweeps away the debris of history; it was ‘the world’s

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<sup>8</sup> John Elderfield, introduction to Hugo Ball (1996) *Flight Out of Time*, Berkeley: xxiv.

<sup>9</sup> F.T. Marinetti, ‘Destruction of Syntax. Imagination without Strings-Words-in-Freedom’ (the original manifesto was published in 1913) in Apollonio (ed.) (1973) *Futurist Manifestos*. London: 97-98.



only hygiene,' and 'futurism intensified,' that allowed the conditions of renewal to arise.<sup>10</sup> For Hugo Ball and others associated with Dada, one of the few things that united the half dozen or so participants in the founding of Dada in 1916 was disgust with the war.<sup>11</sup> War represented for Hugo Ball nothing less than the destruction of the Word, although it produced the 'shabby remnants' from which a new art, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* uniting all the arts, could begin.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, there were a number of correspondences between the various participants in these radical new developments. What was recognized in both cases was that urban life had begun to reveal the depth of the gulf between the individual and the objective world. A new urban soundscape, for example, awaited a means of expression, one that had regard for the peculiarities of noise and speed. In a challenge to notions of harmony and meaning the futurist Luigi Russolo, in *The Art of Noises* (1913), exhorts his reader to take note of the dissonance of 'natural' sounds, indeed, to act upon the disclosure of this new, speedier, mechanistic and impersonal world.<sup>13</sup> A world his fellow futurist Marinetti elaborated by celebrating the cacophony of modern society:

We will sing of the vibrant nightly fervour of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons; greedy railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents; factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke; bridges that stride the rivers like giant gymnasts, flashing in the sun with a glitter of knives; adventurous steamers that sniff the horizon; deep-chested locomotives whose wheels paw the tracks like the hooves of enormous steel horses bridled by tubing; and the sleek flight of planes whose propellers chatter in the wind like banners and seem to cheer like an enthusiastic crowd.<sup>14</sup>

This, to the futurists, was the new artistic palette. The mechanical symphonies of industrial society served notice on the flabby conventions of traditional artistic presentation, as exemplified by the orchestra. In registering the satisfaction he attained

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<sup>10</sup> F.T. Marinetti, 'The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism' (1915); "We will glorify war – the world's only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for" in Apollonio, *ibid* (22), and Marinetti, Settinelli and Corra, 'The Futurist Synthetic Theatre,' (1915); "War – futurism intensified – obliges us to march and not to rot." in Apollonio, *ibid* (183).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Huelsenbeck had said in 1920, "none of us had much appreciation of the kind of courage it took to get shot for the idea of a nation which is at best a cartel of pelt merchants and profiteers in leather, at worst a cultural association of psychopaths who, like the Germans, marched off to war with a volume of Goethe in their knapsacks, to skewer Frenchmen and Russians on their bayonets." Quoted in Greil Marcus (1989) *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, MA: 194-95.

<sup>12</sup> 'Gesamtkunstwerk' is the term given to Ball's idea for a fusion of the arts, an aim that was influenced by his encounters with Wassily Kandinsky. See Hans Richter (1997) *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, London: Pt. 1; and Malcolm Green's introduction to Richard Huelsenbeck (ed.) (1993) *Dada Almanac*, London.

<sup>13</sup> See Umbro Apollonio, *ibid*: 74-88



by seeking stimulation in ‘the combination of the noises of trams, backfiring motors, carriages and bawling crowds’ Luigi Russolo was taking the founding manifesto of Marinetti further and reassessing the music of once loved ‘great masters,’ such as Wagner and Beethoven, who were now declared an insignificant abstraction from the reality of life in the twentieth century urban *mêlée*:

We cannot see that the enormous apparatus of force that the modern orchestra represents without feeling the most profound and total dissolution at the paltry acoustic results. Do you know of any sight more ridiculous than that of twenty men, furiously bent on redoubling the mewling of a violin?<sup>15</sup>

Thundering locomotives and snarling cars drowned out such ‘mewing.’<sup>16</sup> The contrast between such apparent artifice on the one hand, and the totality of modern living in all its sights, sounds and smells on the other, allowed the futurists to at once identify a discordant element between this artistic method of representation and life itself. It also formed the basis of a differentiation between their own experience of the world and the world that art represented, which enabled the establishment of another identity – of the self with something other than this superficiality: perhaps ‘purity’ or immediacy of experience, but certainly something more valid than the artifice of a caterwauling orchestra trussed up in evening dress, or the moribund hierarchies of the artistic establishment.

“Museums: cemeteries!” Marinetti thundered, “identical surely, in the sinister proximity of so many bodies unknown to one another.”<sup>17</sup>

### *To move, or be moved...*

Italian futurism was an elaboration of something that was there for all to see, but which the masks of language and meaning had obscured. That is, nature also exists as an *other* beneath the surface, and beyond our powers of comprehension and communication. The mechanization of movement, the full and inhumane extent of which was revealed by the military technology of the twentieth century, was a force in the development of incongruous relations that began to become apparent to the modern subject; the de-

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid: 22

<sup>15</sup> Ibid: 27

<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that the Futurists’ own *intonamuri* (noise machines), sound by modern standards, quite paltry; they were way ahead of time.

<sup>17</sup> Apollonio, *ibid*: 22.



personalisation of the modern technological subject effectively introduced confusion and stripped the self of its active powers. The individual, in times of industrial war, was merely a puppet, set into motion by the authorial hand of the objective and sovereign state.<sup>18</sup> Movement was all around, but now more than ever beyond subjective control. In the interdependent, and thus complex 'organism,' that industrial society had become, the threat of personal immobility correspondingly realised an objective power of motion; a highly contingent set of circumstances that placed the subject in a dangerous position.

The speedy and thus formless new environment rendered a sense of self, and a sense of the world somewhat out of focus. Whatever else this meant for an understanding of an objective, external reality, it said clearly that we could not be whom we are, or who we hoped to become, without accepting that the self is in some way dependant upon an unfamiliar world, a reality to which it was difficult to be reconciled. The uneasy truth was the self is established, not in any self-determining or rationally autonomous fashion, but in and by relation to the very otherness of nature, which seemed to include the totality of an external reality that did not quite square with the inherited notions of, for example, Enlightenment humanism.<sup>19</sup>

Nature is what we are and yet are not: the modern subject emerges both because of, and in spite of, this otherness. All the trappings of the self, from the 'construction' of subjectivity, and extending to the foundations underlying society and morality, emerge as a consequence of the positing of some identity; an identity, which is primarily negative in origin. In simple terms this is a claim that to be one thing is to not be some other thing. The perfect banality of such an observation is evident in the most elementary of childlike assertions of categorical learning, necessary though they are to a growing awareness of the location of oneself in the world, that, for example, 'to be a man is to not be an animal,' or 'an animal is not a vegetable.' This seeming conflict of antinomies, once again, serves as a mask – below the surface there are no such categories, but rather a continuum in which the two poles oppose, yet go together like thumb and forefinger. The point still needs to be made, however. To be a *person*, to be recognizably autonomous – this fixed character of rational understanding – is to be in a position determinedly to order one's movements in the world. In other words autonomy is

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<sup>18</sup> The war apparatus of the 20<sup>th</sup> century merely realises the Hobbesian prescription for dealing with the failures of the rational mind to submit to a limitation on motion, that is to say 'subjects' are personated by guardians.



realised in the *act* of rendering this negative self-origin *positive*: to be. All identity by differentiation is thus autonomous action – it brings the subject and object into relation.

Success in establishing such a level of control, that is, realizing autonomy, corresponds to an eclipse of the contingent; it is *active*, which is to say *acting* as the donning of the mask that conceals the depth below the surface. If we return to Dada, we can see quite clearly the attempt to untie such relations of identity. “Silk stockings are priceless,” Walter Serner remarks, reasonably enough (although one may disagree); but that’s not all. Identity is destroyed in the novel declaration of broken categories; “A vice queen IS an armchair. World views are word mixtures. A dog IS a hammock. *L’art est mort. Viva Dada!*”<sup>20</sup> In a similar fashion, Tristan Tzara, the most volatile character amongst the Zurich Dadaists declared that he “smashed drawers, those of the brain and those of social organisation.”<sup>21</sup> This is to wander into the land of negative undifferentiated humanity. A mind lacking order also fails to realise autonomy. It becomes the ‘non-subject,’ threatened by whim, existing at the mercy of caprice. It is the disparity between the one who is moved in contrast to the mover.<sup>22</sup> The negative image of the self is the other (which cannot be characterised in analytic terms, as the self can). It is possibility, but no more, in these terms. But actually this other is the basis of everything.

Might *be*, might not *be*. *Maybe?*

This other is also the domain of chance. And chance enters the picture here by accident, as it were, and in response to the apprehension of the accidental as a major part of the modern sensorium, the ground of aesthetic experience, if not causal understanding.<sup>23</sup> Thus, if we note Luigi Russolo’s extensive listing of the various natural sounds, mechanical noises, and other phenomena that might appear to perception as a

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<sup>19</sup> I’m thinking of something like the Enlightenment triumph of reason over darkness and brutality, an ideal contradicted in war and industrial alienation.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Serner, ‘Last Loosening’, in Ball, Huelsenbeck and Serner (1995) *Blago Bung Blago Bung Bosso Fataka: The First Texts of German Dada*, Berkeley: 160.

<sup>21</sup> Tzara, quoted in Hans Richter (1997) *Dada: Art and Anti-art*, London: 34.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Michel Foucault (1999) *Madness and Civilization*, London. Here there are several examples of the importance of movement to autonomy. Foucault memorably begins by describing the ‘ship of fools,’ the madmen flung between ports, but detained at sea, in motion, but immobile, because of their lack of autonomous control. In other places he relates the idea that cures for madness and melancholia rested on the constraining of movement – for example, as a passenger on long sea voyages (174); and, as a passenger of an entirely different kind on the ‘rotary machine,’ a device that sought to redistribute the bodily humours of the patient. (177)

<sup>23</sup> See McAllester Jones (1991) *Gaston Bachelard: Subversive Humanist*, Madison: “The rational subject is no longer sovereign, no longer autonomous, identical and unchanging, but rather transcended, upheld, created and recreated by something other than itself, by the ‘not-self,’ by the discursive, dialectical, dynamic interrelationship between reason and reality.” (7) See also Slavoj Žižek (1997) *The Abyss of Freedom*. Ann Arbor.



reminder of the *accidental* all around us, we see, perhaps surprisingly amongst the unexpected rumblings of nature and the audible ruptures of the living city, that he mentions the sound of the human voice, “the noises made by wild and domestic animals, and of all those that can be made by a man without resorting to speaking or singing.”<sup>24</sup> He suggests that in modern society, the world of blurring, distorted motion evokes in the subject alienation with his own kind. Russolo leaves no place here in his audible spectrum of noises for the ordinarily modulated voice of a *human* regardless of whether it is singing or speaking; not the voice of meaning, reason and intelligibility. Rather, these sounds, made ‘without resorting to singing or speaking,’ suggest the opposite of what we ordinarily expect to come from a human voice certainly from a *person*.<sup>25</sup>

These sounds require a new vocabulary in order to be understood. They are the irrational, emotional, ‘primitive’ sounds of pre-civilisation humanity; the retch which produces fear, the crash that pricks up the ears – these are now the sounds of art. *This* voice – the non-intelligible voice – carries with it surprise, fear, and the immanence of the unexpected. This is the sound of a guttural scream in the night so infused with otherness because it carries with it an unknown significance beyond the sound itself, which is merely the phenomenal sound available to sense; the origin is a mystery precisely because the *causal* origin of the sound is hidden. Our attention is called precisely to this fact, and this alone – whatever this sound signifies it is beyond our power to apprehend the cause, because it arrives, as it were, from the void. It has no meaningful relation to any ‘normal’ sound that precedes or follows it. To the unexpected listener, accidentally brought to sense by it, it perhaps only has a relation to vague ideas of fear and terror, which themselves rely on the unpredictability of the signifier; and precisely because of the anomaly it represents to an analytically understood world, this is a sound that is *unidentifiable*. It speaks of the basic disharmony of nature, and of man as part of nature, rather than man taken apart from nature.

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<sup>24</sup> Luigi Russolo, ‘The Art of Noises,’ in Apollonio, *ibid*: 74-88.

<sup>25</sup> The category of ‘person’ has a philosophical status that establishes the concept of ‘personhood’ firmly within a rational understanding of the world, and has the closest of affinities with notions of ‘agency’ and ‘character.’ Indeed, it is those who we cannot understand, or have difficulty recognizing, that we find it difficult to assign personhood to. See, for example, John Locke (1976) *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, London: sec ii. 27, and Marcel Mauss (1985) ‘A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of the Person; the Notion of the Self,’ in M. Carrithers, S. Collins and S. Lukes (eds) *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, Cambridge, and P. F. Strawson (1959) *Individuals*, London: Ch.3.



Sounds, such as the dissonant noise of the urban environment, are only 'spoken' in the language of chance, in terms of the uncertain, both because of their unpredictability and because the causes of such sounds unseen will always be outside of the grasp and control of the beholder. Uncertainty, therefore, is the gap in understanding. It spews forth from the depths, of no specific origin. A scream, for example, which forms part of Russolo's new musical spectrum – guttural, 'primitive' – it may result in horrible consequences. Yet, it may have an innocuous outcome, departing back into the void without any further disturbance. The sound of distress may equally be the sound of ecstasy. Nevertheless, the fact of the disturbance is enough on its own to remind us that outside of the self the other is a disordered and fundamentally meaningless vacuum, beyond the grasp of reason.

Out of this background, the challenge to the modern artist was, and still is, more of an ontological challenge than an aesthetic one. If we understand reason to be construed analytically, that is by resolving the constituent parts of some object or phenomena in terms of reference that permit identification, then the need for a realignment of the terms of meaning became obvious. What vexed and excited the Italian futurists was the disorientation of the modern world; a loosening that threw into sharp relief the role of the artist as giver of meaning. The 'tools' art employed to understand the world had to be carefully assessed, and those now useless barometers of meaning had, if necessary, to be consigned to the dustbin.

### *A Magical Bishop*

With Dada, as with Italian futurism, it was difficult to know how seriously the intentions of the participants were. Of course, a lack of levity itself can have a deflating tendency; yet, the purpose of such playfulness may remain hidden in the gesture itself. Richard Huelsenbeck, one of the founders of the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, the club formed by the original Dada group, suggested that Dada was established in opposition to what we might recognise as the dualistic modes of conventional thinking, of the categorization of concepts and objects in oppositional terms, and was instead proposing that such easy means of differentiation were obsolete. Dada, he said, "blusters because it knows how to be quiet; it agitates because it is at peace." And just at the point where one can see a glimpse of sense emerging from the wordplay he adds a coda which resonates to hollow laughter; Dada "has war and peace under its toga, but decides in



favour of the cherry brandy flip.”<sup>26</sup> And this was his attempt to convey the significance of Dada.

Yet such apparent explanations of the Dada impulse were as of nothing compared to the serious assault they launched on language, meaning, and any faith in the idea of a logocentric understanding of the world. In the varied responses of the members of the group in Zurich between 1915 and 1919 we are able to plot the dissolution of Dada as anything resembling a coherent movement.<sup>27</sup> Hugo Ball, the principal founder of the Zurich Dada group, would have no truck with the issuing of manifestos, or with propagandist work, which seemed to emulate the activities of futurism, and this was eventually taken up by others, such as Tristan Tzara, and then exported to a variety of other European cities.<sup>28</sup>

One thing that did bind the Zurich group together was the idea that language had to follow painting in re-ordering the world, in making the sensible human image that language portrays equally as fragmentary as the abstract and cubist paintings of the time.<sup>29</sup> Ball had wrote in 1916 that:

The image of human form is gradually disappearing from the painting of these times and all objects appear only in fragments. This is one more proof of how ugly and worn the human countenance has become, and of how all the objects of our environment have become repulsive to us. The next step is for poetry to decide to do away with language for similar reasons.<sup>30</sup>

The power behind the Dada reinvention of language was found in the belief that language and literature had been turned to nefarious uses; in patriotic declarations of support for the war, and in the use of literature in providing moral sustenance for soldiers at the front. The point was that language had become debased to the extent that it was rendered useless; what use were words when they could support butchery? Like the Italian futurists, they sought to situate language within the audible dissonance of the

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Huelsenbeck (1993) *ibid*: 10.

<sup>27</sup> The fact that Dada can't really be considered as a cohesive movement is of minor importance to an understanding of the role some of its participants played in challenging the bounds of accepted sense, and thus dabbling with chance as a crucial element in their endeavours.

<sup>28</sup> See Hugo Ball (1996) *ibid*. Entry for 24.V.1916: “we are never in complete or simultaneous agreement” (63); and Richard Huelsenbeck (1993) *ibid*: “Whoever turns ‘freedom’ or ‘relativity’ including the insight that the contours of everything shift, that nothing is stable, into a ‘firm creed’ is just another ideologue, like the nihilists who are almost always the most incredible, narrow-minded dogmatists. Dada is far removed from all that.” (11)

<sup>29</sup> Jean Arp called cubo-futurism “zigzag naturalism.” See his essay ‘Dadaland’ in (1972) *Arp on Arp: Poems, Essays, Memories*: 234. Walter Serner was less kind, declaring Cubists and Futurist works “thoroughly ultra-violet failures of paint brush charges.” Serner, in Ball, Huelsenbeck and Serner (1995) *ibid*: 158.



times; but more than this was the aim to create, as Malcolm Green has said, “a field of words that bypassed the authors own associations and triggered new ones in the listener.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, the aim was to leave the meaning to chance. The other important thing that Dada had picked up from Italian futurism was the idea that art was created in the spatio-temporal dimension, rather than being produced merely in time, or in space; Einstein’s theories of relativity had fused the two in a new experiential dimension. The printed word, on the other hand, was staid and fixed. It existed, and remained so through the passage of time and unchanged by the motion of bodies in space. The printed word, in books and newspapers, was seen to abstract language from its real context, the context within which life takes place, and what Ball and the others sought to achieve at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916, was a synthesis of the arts that would surpass the mimetic and representational limitations of traditional artistic practice.

The problem for performance was that words and gestures, the ‘language’ of the stage, represented not reality, but conventions which became the mediating experience itself; acting was a mask – a truth so obvious that it had become invisible. In the Cabaret Voltaire performances words were transformed, they became ‘vocables’; not really words at all, but concretized combinations of sounds produced from the voicing of apparently randomly jumbled letters of the alphabet, and these then delivered without any regard to meaning.<sup>32</sup> This corresponded in some small way to Luigi Russolo’s new idea of the human voice, the characteristics of which he listed as one of six “families of noise of the Futurist orchestra,” under the heading *Voices of Animals and Men*.<sup>33</sup> These he listed as, “Shouts, Screams, Groans, Shrieks, Howls, Laughs, Wheezes, Sobs,” and the corollary between the two divergent movements with regard to the place of meaningless sound in art is shown if we compare the Dadaist Jean Arp’s remarks about “automatic poetry,” which “springs directly from the poet’s bowels or other organs, which have stored up reserves of usable material. The poet crows, curses, sighs, stutters, yodels, as he pleases. His poems are like Nature.”<sup>34</sup> Of course, this ideal could only be realised in performance, and it is in this respect that Hugo Ball, the main founder of Dada, seems

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<sup>30</sup> See Hugo Ball (1996) *ibid*, entry for 5<sup>th</sup> March 1916: 55.

<sup>31</sup> See Malcolm Green’s Introduction to Huelsenbeck (ed) (1993) *Dada Almanac*: v.

<sup>32</sup> Tzara took this principle from performance into the printed word, and created the ‘cut-up’. According to Hans Richter (1997) *ibid*: “he cut newspaper articles up into tiny pieces, none of them any longer than a word, put the words in a bag, shook them well, and allowed them to flutter onto a table. The arrangement (or lack of it) in which they fell constituted a ‘poem’” (54)

<sup>33</sup> See Apollonio (ed.), *ibid*: 86.



to have diverged from the others. In his introduction to Ball's diaries, translated as *Flight Out of Time*, John Elderfield writes that:

Ball had found that the act of recitation itself tested a poem's quality and determined its impact. Basic to his interpretation of poetry was his conviction that it had far more aspects to it than its written words.<sup>35</sup>

Not at all incidental to Ball's view that performance should converge upon new possibilities, was the uses of masks and costumes in the Cabaret, and these, it turned out, were to become an essential component in transcending the limitations of the word, bringing Hugo Ball, in particular, to a startling realisation of the possibility of renewing the word, that is *logos*, through the sound-poem, which would be the route to the truth below the surface. The accidental nature of this discovery reveals the serious point behind the use of masks, which seems only to have been realised after Marcel Janco had prepared the costumes and the participants in the Cabaret had taken up 'character' under the influence of these new appearances. The masks, in fact, only highlighted the protean nature of expression; the elusiveness, the naked strangeness of the sound and motion of performance. Hugo Ball wrote that a transformation had overtaken the performers. The mask, he observed, "demanded a quite definite, passionate gesture, bordering on madness."<sup>36</sup> The masks revealed to Ball the deceitful phenomenal world, the misleading world of appearances, of word and gesture, that provide the stage for meaningful life, and suggested the possibility that the only way to come to terms with the illusion was through the deceptive power of a kind of play; a hide-and-seek:

Although we could not have imagined it five minutes earlier, we were walking around with the most bizarre movements, festooned and draped with impossible objects [...] the motive power of these masks was irresistibly conveyed to us. All at once we realized the significance of such a mask [...] they represent not human character and passions, but character and passions that are higher than life. The horror of our time, the paralyzing background of events, is made visible.<sup>37</sup>

Play is understood by the categorical mind, not as the route to truth, but in its frivolity and sensuousness, as rather the way of error. In archaic societies, by contrast, it is taken

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<sup>34</sup> Cited in Hans Richter (1997) *ibid*: 30.

<sup>35</sup> John Elderfield, in Ball (1996) *ibid*: xxviii.

<sup>36</sup> Ball (1996) *ibid*: 64.



as the return of an arbitrary cosmos to the divine lottery of Zeus – in other words, as an earlier way to divine truth.<sup>38</sup> The donning of masks and costumes upsets the cosy familiarity of the world, and in the liquidity of the performance of bizarre movements and ecstatic recitation, language, in the mutable form of the Dadaist vocables, emerges correspondingly draped in the unrecognizable garb of meaninglessness. “We have now driven the plasticity of the word to the point where it can scarcely be equalled,” Ball remarked:

We have loaded the word with strengths and energies that helped us to rediscover the evangelical concept of the *word* (logos) as a magical complex image [...] touching lightly on a hundred ideas at the same time without naming them, this sentence made it possible to hear the innately playful, but hidden irrational character of the listener.<sup>39</sup>

To return to the problem of identity, what is crucial to our understanding is that these performances dramatized the problem of appearance within the context of *change*. Change is realised in plasticity, but identity, as a kind of tautological redescription-of-the-same, only pertains in a state of changelessness.<sup>40</sup> But, as we know, things do change; being is becoming – thus, the possibility that the world, or nature, may be ambiguous is rehearsed through the disguises of performance. Of all the Zurich Dada group, Hugo Ball experienced the most profound change as a result of the experiments at the Cabaret Voltaire.

In June 1916, barely a year after arriving in Zurich, Ball split from his colleagues after a particularly harrowing performance, which enacted a transformation on the performer himself. In his diaries he describes giving a reading of some of his sound-poems (it would be his last performance at the Cabaret) in a costume specially made for the event (Plate 11). The costume was so confining as to require on the spot adjustments to the performance, and so it determined his movements in a particular way, and this in turn influenced his readings. So, having been carried on stage due to his immobility,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> See Mihai Spariousu (1989) *Dionysus Reborn*. Ithaca.

<sup>39</sup> Ball (1996) *ibid*: 67-68.

<sup>40</sup> The alternative view, that identity is the ‘thing’, the relation that establishes the ‘object’ that remains throughout spatio-temporal changes, is open to the charge of essentialism. Cf. David Wiggins (1980) *Sameness and Substance*, Oxford. This view of identity is elaborated in an examination of Leibniz’s Indiscernibility of Identicals. My point is not quite this, however. I do not argue that there is some underlying ‘harmony,’ ‘soul,’ or ‘God,’ but rather that there is only contingency – in material terms this contingency is found in the undifferentiated matter of nature, in the formless, etc.



Ball was left with only his arms free; the rest of his body, wrapped in a tightly fitting cylinder, was stiff. Nevertheless, with arms free he found, he was able to “give the impression of winglike movement by raising and lowering [the] elbows,” which he duly did by flapping them energetically between readings, at the same time furtively trying to work out how this thing might end:

I noticed that my voice had no choice but to take on the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation [...] for a moment it seemed as if there were a pale, bewildered face in my cubist mask, that half-frightened, half-curious face of a ten-year-old boy, trembling and hanging avidly on the priest's words in the requiems and high masses in his home parish. Then the lights went out, as I had ordered, and bathed in sweat, I was carried from down off the stage like a magical bishop.<sup>41</sup>

Ball's description is somewhat reminiscent of the near catastrophic experience of the wager, which is itself an experience of the world as a magico-religious sensorium. Delving deeply into the unknown he becomes caught in the vertigo of the playful forces of denial and affirmation. He chose the stage, but now he loses dominion over it. The audience on this occasion was alarmed; it ‘exploded,’ and Ball succumbed to chance, emerging after what seems like an out of body experience. Hans Richter notes, in his history of Dada, that after this date Hugo Ball “progressively disengaged himself from Dada.” Tristan Tzara had begun to take a more prominent role in the group, nudging things in a more propagandist, pamphleteering, and confrontational direction. “I have examined myself carefully, “ Ball said, “and I could never bid chaos welcome.”<sup>42</sup> The truth was that he already had, and it proved disconcerting enough to draw him back from the abyss.

With Ball's departure the moment had passed. The significance of Dada rests with the original Zurich group, and the founding of the Cabaret Voltaire. What followed was a continuation, if not repetition, of an ever more provocative tomfoolery. With a barely concealed hint of nihilism, Walter Serner, a latecomer to the Zurich Dadaists, took the radical nominalism of Dada rhetoric to an extremity of meaningless and disintegration in his *Last Loosening* (1918).<sup>43</sup> This riposte to good taste, executed to hilarious effect in

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<sup>41</sup> Ball (ibid) ibid: 70-71.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Richter (1997) ibid: 43.

<sup>43</sup> Huelsenbeck (1993) in the *Dada Almanac* describes him thus: “Dr. Walter Serner...extreme adventurer, nihilist and venereologist...The epitome of the ‘gentleman burglar’ (Arp), he was later the author of numerous sleazy crime stories.” (92)





PLATE 11. HUGO BALL PERFORMING *KARAWANE*, 1916. Performances at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916 combined two distinctive elements. On the one hand there were what John Elderfield called the “energy-loaded sound poems” of Ball and others (a typographical representation of one, *Karawane*, appears above), and also Marcel Janco’s masks and costumes which, Hugo Ball noted in his diary, called for a “quite definite, passionate gesture, bordering on madness.” See John Elderfield’s introduction to Hugo Ball, 1996, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*: p.xxxiii, and Ball’s entry for 24<sup>th</sup> May 1916.



barely a dozen pages, displayed a keen sense of the ultimate profanity of things, of the cosmetic re-ordering of the face mask that lays a basis for identity and meaning. Although it is not clear whether he included his fellow Dadaists in his disparaging appraisal of the artistic objective of appropriating the world (but a good guess would suggest it is likely), it is evident that he was reaching for the chaos that Hugo Ball recoiled from. “It is generally known that a dog is not a hammock; less so that failing to accept this tender hypothesis would cause the painter’s daubing fists to slump at their sides.”<sup>44</sup> Ergo, painting is hamstrung by problems of identity and representation. He goes further, and who can say how serious he took this, suggesting that the artistic impulse derives from an embarrassment at the thought of doing nothing, compounded by an inability to constrain oneself, of seemingly not knowing how to be lazy. And all this in the face of the gratuitousness of existence:

It’s all just the same [...] the desire to escape one’s embarrassment by giving it (stylistic, ogodogodo) form. Dreadful word! Which is to say: to make something that is profitable out of life, which is improbable to the tips of its toes! To clap a redeeming heaven over this filth and enigma! To perfume and order this pile of human excrement!

In short, the arts were evidence of the inability to get to grips with being, to refrain from fixing things. “All in all, my dearest,” he writes, “art was just a teething problem.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Walter Serner, ‘Last Loosening,’ in Ball, Huelsenbeck and Serner (1995) *Blago Bung Blago Bung Bosso Fataka!* London: 155.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid: 156



## 8 Devil in Disguise

Precision Oculism. Rrose Sélavy. New York-Paris.  
Complete Line of Whiskers and Kicks.

*Calling card for RROSE SÉLAVY*

In *Homo Ludens*, his study of the play element in culture, originally published in 1938, Johan Huizinga drew a sharp distinction between poetry, music and dance on the one hand, and the plastic arts – painting and sculpture – on the other. Huizinga observed that the dependence of the plastic arts on matter – clay, paint, canvas – accounted for the difficulty in identifying this sphere of artistic activity with what he called ‘free play,’ meaning an activity that was without any external goal, or that was not limited by any external or material constraints. Painters and sculptors, he believed, were denied lasting access to the play impulse because, unlike the poet and musician, these other artists were required by their medium:

To fix a certain aesthetic impulse in matter by means of diligent and painstaking labour [...the artist’s] inspiration may be free and vehement when he ‘conceives,’ but in its execution, it is always subjected to the skill and proficiency of the forming hand.<sup>1</sup>

The point Huizinga was making was that once the object is fixed, made ‘concrete,’ it is effectively frozen in time and space, purely as a consequence of its materiality, and so fully present to the senses and incapable of realizing the fluidity of motion found in the other arts, because “where there is no visible action” – as with the finished painting, for example – “there can be no play.”<sup>2</sup> The object of plastic creation therefore spells an

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<sup>1</sup> Johan Huizinga (1955) *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Boston: 166.

<sup>2</sup> Huizinga, *ibid*: 166. Huizinga seems to share a preference for music and poetry as the higher, or purer art forms with a German philosophical tradition. See Martin Jay (1993) *Downcast Eyes*, Berkeley. This tradition viewed these arts as the quintessential art forms because their “non-representational quality insulated [these forms] against too natural a mimesis of the given world.” (265)



end to this action, because its existence is the end of the indeterminate motion of play that is found in artistic creation.

We can note that play, on Huizinga's account at least, is characteristically boundless in the sense that the oscillatory movement that is inescapably bound up with play forces a continual re-alignment of expectations.<sup>3</sup> More generally, to the subject at play, there is no knowing when the play motion will end, or where it will go – it could be cancelled by the interference of the world 'outside', that is to say, by a sensory intrusion; something innocuous and unexpected, a sight or a sound, perhaps. This is also reflected in a corresponding objective meaninglessness, as the slippery movement of a world that eludes categories.

As observers, play challenges our capacity for definition, and makes it difficult to identify what is happening, because it cannot be viewed or understood in terms of objective intentions, although we are usually able to recognize it just as this thing 'play,' the generalization of which merely suggests the incipient disorder of a non-specific categorisation. And so fittingly, play to order is, as Huizinga noted, no longer play, but instead becomes a rule-bound game; we learn to 'play' musical instruments, for example, by observing the *rules* of musical theory.

The curious thing about these perceptions of play, and of the role of play in the plastic arts, and the explanation of why these constitute my point of departure here, is that this view was still expressed towards the middle of the twentieth century. By the time *Homo Ludens* was published it had largely been forgotten that over twenty years before, in the period just before the outbreak of the Great War, a revolution in the plastic arts had taken place, one I am suggesting that forces a reconsideration of this idea of the absence of the play element in 'plastic art' – a term that would come to encompass, I argue, a non-material element that was absent in Huizinga's definition of the term.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> There is also a philosophical distinction to be drawn between what we see on the surface – let us call this physical movement – and what we cannot see, which is the intention that may, or may not, be moving the body. Thus some philosophers have made a distinction between action and motion. The point here is that play may not always look like we expect it to, that is to say, may not be observable in physical movements, or in verbal play, and so on. However, for the sake of simplicity we may infer that when Huizinga speaks of 'visible action' that this is understood as the movement of a body, or bodies. An ontology of action tells us that action can also be motionless, and that motion can be free of action. See, for example, Lawrence Davis (1979) *Theory of Action*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

<sup>4</sup> For a larger historical perspective on play and modernity, see Hans-Georg Gadamer (1995) *Truth and Method*, New York.



Of course the history of modernism is also a history of revolutions, a history of the self-critical appraisal of the medium of painting itself, from the abandonment of classical imitation – the picturing of an ideal, separate, reality – to the rediscovery of the corporeality of human vision in the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> By the 1940's the latest development in this continual renewal had resulted in American action field painting, and pure abstract expressionism, found in the work of artists like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko, for example.

### *Painting and 'Framing'*

We should make no mistake: what was happening in this latest manifestation of modernism was new. Nevertheless, it was also a development that remained within the formalist constraints of painting, which was what allowed Huizinga to suggest that such work (had he viewed it) could not be free play. As for the more or less undetermined motion of play, we may see, for example, elements of chance in some of this painting. In the paint-drip technique employed by Jackson Pollock, some saw evidence of an element of the accidental, although the artist disagreed with this, distancing himself from the idea that he indulged disorder by remarking in 1950 that “with experience it seems to be possible to control the flow of the paint to a great extent, and...I don't use the accidental – ‘cause I deny the accident.”<sup>6</sup>

Other members of this school whose work looked less like the accidental played a part in the conception or execution of the paintings were no less diligent than Pollock in emphasizing the *practice* of their art, revealing in actual fact, the great pains it took to be creative. Of William de Kooning, for example, one of the central figures in the abstract expressionist movement, it was said that here was:

An artist whose purity of purpose and commitment to the painterly process became a model for the generation of the fifties [...and that] these artists faced the canvas with the Self...the only control was that of truth, intuitively felt. If it wasn't true to our feeling, according to protocol it had to be rubbed out. In fact, painters boasted of their paintings as a tangible record of a series of errors.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> On the importance of the eye as understood through the ‘unstable physiology and temporality’ of the human body, see Martin Jay, *ibid*, chapter three.

<sup>6</sup> See Daniel Belgrad (1998) *The Culture of Spontaneity*, Chicago: 168.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in B. Altshuler (1994) *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, Berkeley: 161-62.



What we can take from this is that aside from the obvious materiality of the Abstract Expressionists' near exclusive use of paint and canvas – a form that limits the continuation of play – there is also obviously this idea of adherence to a particular school of thinking about what the purpose of painting should be (not unusual in itself, as modernism is also a graveyard of 'isms'), or to the 'purity' of abstraction, to painterly 'protocols,' or concerns over the control of materials, and so on. All this suggests that Huizinga was quite accurate in his refusal to admit plastic creation – 'subjected to the skill and proficiency of the forming hand' – into the realm of the truly playful.<sup>8</sup>

Less obviously painterly than Abstract Expressionism, techniques of collage had already altered the scope of expression and were common since Cubism, which is to say for 40 years or more – in the use of found elements of text and matter, which broke the two-dimensional flatness of the canvas – but clearly painting was still the predominant mode of expression, and at this time abstract expressionism saw New York take over from Paris as the capital of modern art.<sup>9</sup>

Lost amongst all this, largely obscured by the influence of these artists, was much in the way of memory of the real revolution in twentieth century art, began in 1912 when Marcel Duchamp, a painter of notoriety if not a painter of note, abandoned painting, and in moving beyond the confines of material and form, he was able to engage in a ceaseless play. Duchamp had already moved through a variety of styles between the start of the century and this moment in 1912, and perhaps reflecting his lack of impact as a conventional painter as much as his unease with its limitations, he made the crucial decision to look for other means of exploring his ideas. "Marcel," he wrote in a note to himself in 1912, "no more painting."<sup>10</sup> Duchamp's 'shipwrecked' artist as an individual – no schools, and no social or personal limits – was in stark contrast to all that went

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<sup>8</sup> Edward Lucie-Smith (2001) observed, "[Jackson] Pollock and [Franz] Kline seem to have had perfect faith in canvas and paint as a viable means of communicating something." See, *Movements in Art Since 1945*, London: 36.

<sup>9</sup> It has been suggested by Mark C. Taylor (1992) that Duchamp's implicit question to the art world — does a work of art need to be 'created' to be art — was already implicit in cubist collage. In *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture and Religion*, Taylor notes, "the techniques of collage and papiers collés employ everyday objects to interrupt the purity and homogeneity of the painted surface." With the use of everyday objects he says, the separation of the realm of art and the realm of things is destroyed. See 163-64.

<sup>10</sup> The quote is from Sanouillet and Peterson (1973) (eds) *Selected Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, London: 133. Duchamp never really earned a living from his own art for the rest of his life. For a time he was a librarian; later he would be a French language teacher, and an art dealer. His abandonment of the profession of artist did not, however, reflect a desire to give up being an artist. It was to enable him to become 'completely freelance'. "The artist should be alone," he said in 1912. "Everyone for himself, as in a shipwreck." See Calvin Tomkins (1998) *Duchamp: A Biography*, London: 84.



before him; in other words, the history of 'isms' that constitute the development of modernism.

In the light of his relative obscurity at the time, it is remarkable that within the space of ten years, Duchamp would have produced the work that turned the art world upside down – although this was very much a delayed effect – leaving a body of work that contradicted and shocked the expectations of the art world, and that would see him cajole twentieth-century art into the realm of play, that Huizinga, writing in 1938, believed it could not inhabit. “Play only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable,” Huizinga had said, “when an influx of *mind* breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos.”<sup>11</sup> That is to say, play is not matter, it cannot be realised in painting, in material objectivity generally, because in its fluidity it “bursts the bounds of the physically existent,” and so only has significance as an interlude from what we might call the determinate motion of life, which is to say, the meeting of needs, and the undertaking of work for definite, usually rational, ends – such as applying paint to canvas to create art.<sup>12</sup>

For Marcel Duchamp the aspect of play in his work after 1912 was allowed to ascend to the heights of free play, of chance, by forgetting the demands of painting, and to be precise, by overcoming the resistance of the medium by abolishing its validity where others before had submitted to it.

Duchamp's playfulness has an element of child's play about it, this is clear, although his playfulness also takes on a more serious tone when seen through the historical lens. I want to suggest that Duchamp consciously employed disguise because he saw the pretence of masking his identity as analogical to a double-dealing art world, and that the means of coming to terms with this duplicity was through selective strategies of masking and unmasking. By playing hide and seek with the art world, he was able to show how seriously entrenched tradition was. The consequence of this was a re-evaluation, through his *readymades*, of the determinate means of painting as a medium, and this extended generally to a doubting of the idea that an artist working in the visual field had to employ plastic means.

These, then, were his ideas, which all boil down to one statement – that being an artist is not about painting, about the medium, but about choosing, or differentiating

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<sup>11</sup> Huizinga, *ibid*: 3.



some object and bringing it to some place where it may be considered in a new way. This was the influx of *mind*, which – to restate Huizinga’s *active* condition of play – fundamentally upset the artistic cosmos.<sup>13</sup>

In the readymades – everyday objects that were taken out of context and declared to be ‘art’ – a crucial component of the play was that Duchamp was allowed to suspend meaning. Between possibility and actuality, something and nothing, these items, found *already made*, were only realised as ‘a readymade,’ according to Duchamp, as a condition of their contingency both *in* and *as* a kind of ‘rendezvous.’ In the former case, this was as a meeting of the idea of the readymade and the designated object – that is, in finding/choosing the object, and in the latter case as “being subject to all kinds of delays” – which is the delay that intervenes after Duchamp’s choice and prior to the determination of the objective meaning of the item to, say, a viewer, as Duchamp noted in a well-known ‘specification’ for the readymade:

*Specifications for “Readymades”*

by planning for a moment to come (on such a day, such a date such a minute), to “to *inscribe* a readymade – The ready made can later be looked for. – (with all kinds of delays). The important thing then is just this matter of timing, this snapshot effect [...] It is a kind of rendezvous.<sup>14</sup>

A highly contentious and disagreeable aspect of this way of making or creating art was in the role it gave to a public. In an interview with Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp explained:

The artist makes something, then one day, he is recognized by the intervention of the public, of the spectator [...] you can’t stop that, because in brief it’s the product of two poles – there’s the one pole of the one who makes the work, and the pole of the one who looks at it. I give the latter as much importance as the one who makes it.<sup>15</sup>

Duchamp’s ‘delays’ can also be understood in terms of the time it takes for these two poles to meet, the unknown arrival of the viewing eye leaving an essential tension hanging over the question of meaning. This tension might not be evident in the ‘visible action’ of some phenomena, but the anxiety produced by these readymades was enough,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid: 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> Huizinga, Ibid: 8, observes that the “consciousness of play being ‘only a pretend’ does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with utmost seriousness.”

<sup>14</sup> These specifications are in the notes collected as ‘The Green Box,’ reproduced in Sanouillet and Peterson (1973) *ibid*: 32.



as we shall see, to prevent the establishment of a fixed, or stable meaning. As Octavio Paz has said, the readymades saw Duchamp ‘juggling with knives,’ and succeeding, he believes:

Because, in the end, the gesture is a philosophical or, rather dialectical game more than an artistic operation: it is a negation which, through humour, becomes affirmation. Suspended by irony, in a state of perpetual oscillation, this affirmation is always provisional.<sup>16</sup>

The effect of the readymade was to remove the frame – the frame of reference, as well as the actual physical boundaries of a frame that separates a canvas from the context in which it hangs, a separation that sees the playfulness of artistic creativity terminate with the object itself, bound and finitely given within space and time.<sup>17</sup> As Thierry de Duve has said, “in front of a readymade there is no longer any technical difference between making art and appreciating it.”<sup>18</sup> This, once permitted, became the condition for the readymade. However, by the time *Homo Ludens* was published, Duchamp was largely forgotten as an artist, apparently more determined to become a chess champion than to remain an artist.<sup>19</sup> As the consequence of another delay, however, by the end of the twentieth century, his status as the father of conceptual art would be sealed, along with his reputation as the master prankster of modern art, its devil in disguise, a reputation that derives, chiefly, from one particularly impenetrable object.<sup>20</sup>

### *A Familiar Article of Bathroom Furniture*

For a long time, modernist and avant-garde art had been visiting new territory, and it is not denied that sometimes this was shocking and iconoclastic in its innovation. In large part this derived from presenting something familiar within a new context, or in a new form. Antoine Compagnon, for example, notes the outrage that surrounded Manet’s two most infamous paintings, *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* and *Olympia*, which were greeted with

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid: 70.

<sup>16</sup> Octavio Paz (1970) *Marcel Duchamp, Or the Castle of Purity*, London: 17

<sup>17</sup> On the ‘paragonal’ effect of painting traditions, cf. Viktor I. Stoichita (1997) *A Short History of the Shadow*. London.

<sup>18</sup> See Thierry de Duve (1996) *Kant After Duchamp*, Cambridge, MA: 290.

<sup>19</sup> By the mid-1940’s Duchamp’s influence was eclipsed by the Abstract Expressionists, a school he was unimpressed by as being too retinal. For their own part, the Abstract Expressionists did not rate Duchamp, and his reputation in this period suffered accordingly; John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns would later be involved in reviving Duchamp’s reputation. See Calvin Tomkins (1998) *ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> Chapter ten of this work explores some aspects of the arts that have taken forward Duchamp’s questioning of identity and meaning.



disapproval partly because of the decontextualising of archetypes, in these two cases the female nude, and perhaps, as Martin Jay suggests, because of the shocking return of the viewer's gaze from the figures Manet had depicted, a painterly device to draw the viewer in that had largely been abandoned by this time.<sup>21</sup>

The nude carried with it a history of depiction that regulated the aesthetic conditions for understanding the form of the nude. Manet not only re-evaluated this particular context, but by his method of 'framing' his paintings – of masking off the boundary that separated viewer and painting, by use of brush and paint, he had developed a new concentration on the picture itself, that the use of skill to remove the perspective that would have provided an illusion of depth in the scene, forced a concentration on the artist's hand and the scepticism of external reality that this betrayed.<sup>22</sup>

One familiar object, taken out of its normal context, took the capacity of modernism to shock several steps further than this. In 1917 Marcel Duchamp unveiled a work known as *Fountain*, one of his readymades. We say this now with all the authority of fact, but actually, Duchamp did not unveil it; he sent it to an exhibition under an assumed name – but more of that later. This 'sculpture,' as it was sometimes referred to at the time, was not actually a fountain, but rather an upturned urinal – a mass-produced piece of bathroom equipment. It was neither sculpture nor painting.

The significance of this de-contextualised urinal was in the impact it made on questions of representation, of the contextual limits on the meaning of a work of art. This becomes so pronounced that identification between a work of art and the world needn't now bother an artist at all. Contrast this with the situation *prior* to Marcel Duchamp's readymade, to other modernist innovations such as impressionism, fauvism, or cubism, which Jerrold Seigel suggests "had been undertaken for some aesthetic

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<sup>21</sup> See Martin Jay (1993) *ibid*: chapter three. One thing that I want to insist on is that the chance element is in the *perception* of these works of 'art' and that locates them within the realm of play, rendering any notions of meaning and identity quite contingent. It is thus within the context of play that I am here identifying such modern work as radically contingent. T.J. Clark suggests a much earlier, and irreversible, contingent character in the history of modern painting, dating from David's painting of Marat, of 1793, that is found in this work's "spatial and human closeness," its "immediacy." See T.J. Clark (1999) *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, New Haven: chapter two. To be clear on the difference of my position: I am locating contingency in the transformation of objects from something recognisable into something confusing. This, in a sense, leaves the work unfinished. Furthermore, the necessity of this effect derives from the removal of painterly constraints, and so makes the contingent element a matter of our (viewer and artist) relation to objects. My point is that the source of contingency with regard to the element of play rests on the objects being particular kinds of objects. This neither contradicts nor disagrees with the point Clark makes about contingency.

<sup>22</sup> See Antoine Compagnon (1994) *Five Paradoxes of Modernity*, New York: chapter one.



purpose, to expand art's subject matter, extend its expressive range, or heighten its perceptual power."<sup>23</sup>

Duchamp saw artistic conventions as almost a succession of disguises, as the empirically given surface of which perception would conceal the fact that there was no depth on the surface. He almost regarded modernism as evidence of this essential lack of depth. Other 'schools' were concerned with developing modern self-criticism, but Duchamp could not fit into this. He saw himself, in his own words, 'shipwrecked,' left on his own – he was no longer interested in expanding the form of painting, but having been a painter he was concerned with what he regarded to be the limitations imposed by stylistic conventions, and even personal habits, which was one reason he gave up painting. Another was that he considered artistic freedom in radical terms, as absolute freedom from any social or personal demands – of the absolute artistic isolation of apostasy, and therefore sought to realise this by developing a kind of indifference to the art world around him, to not have to make art out of any professional duty, or even aesthetic impulse, and this also explains why for the majority of his life he earned his living through a variety of occupations and endeavours, but not through his art. "There are two kinds of artists," he said. "The artist that deals with society, is integrated into society; and the other artist, the completely freelance artist, who has no obligations."<sup>24</sup> He sought, in other words the freedom of pure play, rather than the rational limits of Kantian freedom, which is the freedom of man as a social being, freedom consequent on plurality in being rather than singularity.

Another important aspect of the development of the play element was in the use he began to make of the accidental. The various 'rendezvous' that brought the readymades into being seemed to result from whim, if we accept Duchamp's 'specification for the readymade,' although the impossibility of destroying the link between the eye that sees and one's memory of likes and dislikes seems obvious, and mitigates the chance element in creation, this is not where the readymades truly realise a radical contingency<sup>25</sup>. With each readymade, Duchamp effectively wagering on their reception by posterity, and one

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<sup>23</sup> Jerrold Seigel (1995) *The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp*, Berkeley: 115.

<sup>24</sup> Sanouillet and Peterson, *ibid*: 133.

<sup>25</sup> They are radically contingent because as previously 'known' objects they set up a host of expectations related to use and context. Similarly, the artist contributes to the radically contingent character of such work *because* contingency as the residue of knowledge is manifested in the figure of the modern artist as a category breaker. Thus, it is necessary that the artist be an insider – in other words, the work is also radically contingent because it is *rooted* in the modern artistic temperament.



reason he avoided taking up painting as a profession was that he knew that the resolution of this wager was unforeseeable, or up to chance:

The danger is in pleasing an immediate public, the immediate public that comes around you and takes you in and accepts you and gives you success and everything. Instead of that, you should wait fifty or a hundred years for your true public.<sup>26</sup>

The unearthing of Duchamp's intentions through the evidence left behind in interviews and notes suggest that many of the readymades appear to have been created far from accidentally. Nevertheless, the importance of the second, delayed, rendezvous marks these out as no ordinary artworks; they realised no real craft, no expression of self, and lacking this creative identity they became meaningful only in the act of observation, like the atoms of the quantum world, and thus only meaningful by chance.<sup>27</sup>

For his part of this wager, Duchamp reveals in his recollection of his choice of the earliest readymades that the most important component of his choosing was given by making the merest alteration to the item, one that created an ambiguous object:

In 1913 I had the happy idea to fasten a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool and watch it turn. A few months later I bought a cheap reproduction of a winter evening landscape, which I called 'Pharmacy' after adding two small dots, a red one and a yellow one, in the horizon. In New York in 1915 I bought at a hardware store a snow shovel on which I wrote 'In Advance of the Broken Arm.'<sup>28</sup>

And thus was born an idea that would revolutionize art in the twentieth century: the idea that the artist would respect no limitations of form, matter, or mediation.<sup>29</sup> This first readymade also went beyond, for example, the attempt in futurist painting to incorporate motion in the fact that it was a 'moving sculpture,' although this was a motion which had no point, no goal, as the circular motion of the upturned wheel

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid: 133.

<sup>27</sup> It is argued that some readymades can be shown to have involved a high degree of design, or a great involvement in the manipulation of the circumstances surrounding their reception. I would not disagree. In fact this just emphasizes again the play aspect, which Duchamp was indulging all the time. On the apparent 'manufacture' of Fountain, see for example, William Camfield, 'Duchamp's Fountain: Aesthetic Object, Icon, or Anti-Art?' in Thierry De Duve (1991)(ed) *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, Cambridge, MA: 133-79.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Duchamp's 'Apropos of Readymades,' Sanouillet and Peterson, *ibid*: 141-42. Commentators have dated the readymade to variously 1912 • when Duchamp first had the idea for a readymade, and 1917 and the first public showing of a readymade – the infamous Fountain.

<sup>29</sup> See Thierry De Duve (1998) *ibid*. This is his thesis. I come to this view from the perspective of identity. That is, objects, and objectivity are bound up with notions of completeness and order. The disorder of expectations is manifested in the denial of rational categories of identification.



prevented the possibility of the linear progression of rational movement (Plate 12). It is motion suspended, or in other words, the directionless motion of play.<sup>30</sup>

From our point of view, the most notable aspect of the readymade is that it presents Duchamp at the beginning of a history of fascination with disguise, with games of hide and seek, which culminate with his final work, *Etant Donnés (Given)*, which is barely glimpsed by the observer through a peep hole. There is, in Duchamp's work, an indulgence of chance that takes the artist and audience below the surface of the perceptible to the fluidity of ideas, a journey that was not possible to the same extent with painting. For Duchamp, the problem with painting was partially that the necessity of working with certain accepted materials itself imposed a limitation, in that the artist standing with brush in hand would find it difficult to avoid self-expression. The medium of expression, then, was blocking the realisation of ideas. "I considered painting as a means of expression," Duchamp said in 1956:

One means of expression among others, and not a complete end for life at all; in the same way I consider that color is only a means of expression in painting and not an end. In other words, painting should not be exclusively retinal or visual; it should have to do with the gray matter.<sup>31</sup>

The connection between the acceptability of means of expression, the use of medium, and autonomy, was at the root of the problem for Duchamp. The autonomous artist, like the autonomous subject in general, was thought to be 'transparent,' and this was reflected in the assumption that art, particularly realist art, was comprehensible – that is to say susceptible to understanding on the basis of what is seen; the rational mind assumes that what is on the surface is representative of something deeper, something genuine and fixed, rather than something fleeting or elusive.

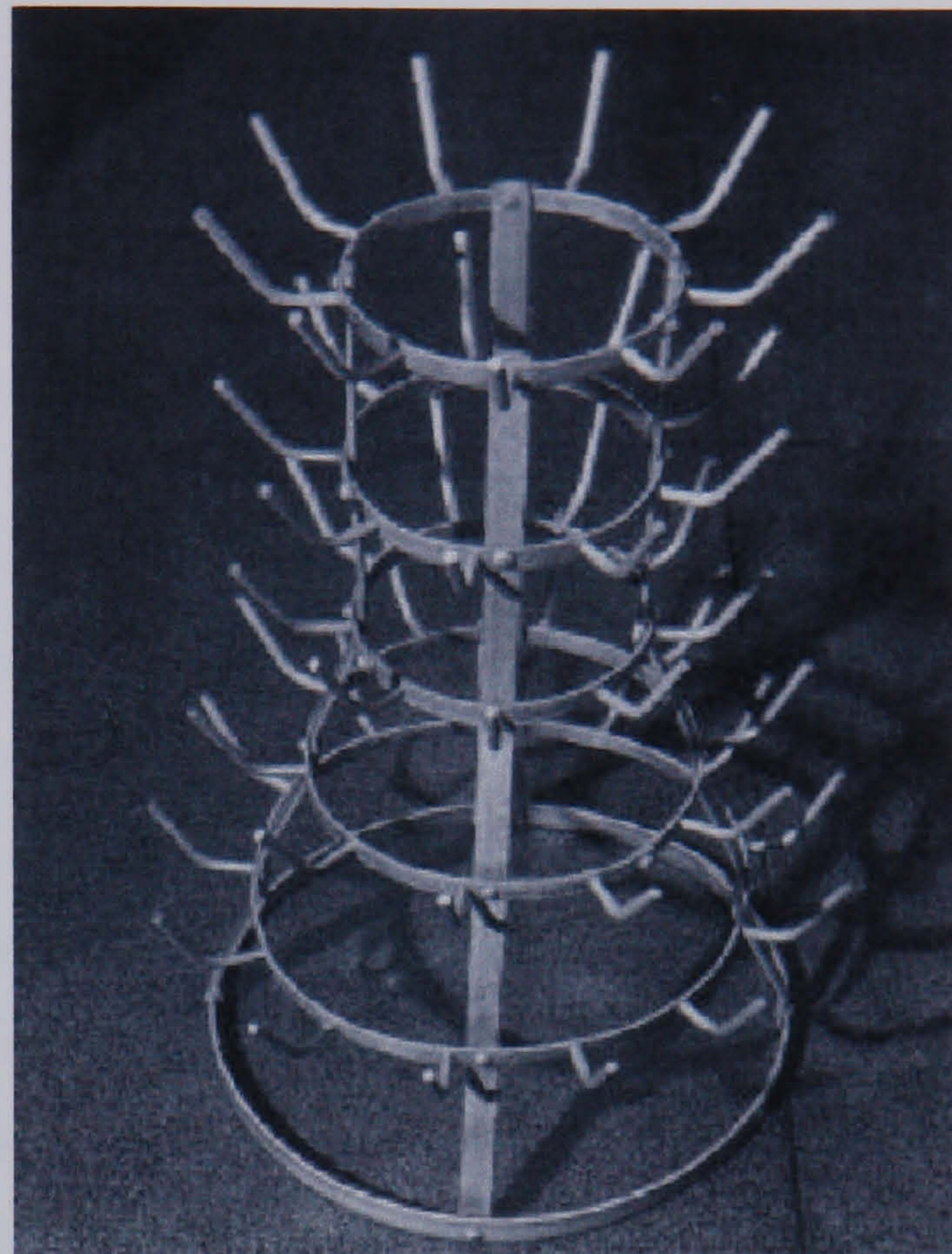
We might suggest that Duchamp's problem with painting could be stated thus: the painting, relying on its bounded, finite form, as the *prima facie* evidence of plastic activity, presents the artist as someone who attempts to connect with some truth, but instead of accepting the empirical evidence of surfaces, that the flat plane of the canvas could present anything more than an opinion, Duchamp preferred to say, so it seems,

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<sup>30</sup> A point made by Jerrold Seigel, *Ibid*: 122. See also Ades, Cox and Hopkins (1999) *Duchamp*, London: 47. The authors suggest that Bicycle Wheel can be seen as "a direct or half-satirical response to the demands of Futurist manifestos, and in particular of Umberto Boccioni's 'Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture' of 1912.

<sup>31</sup> See Sanouillet and Peterson, *ibid*: 135-36.





**PLATE 12. READYMADES, Marcel Duchamp, 1913-1917.** The readymades were ambiguous gestures - questions that asked what plastic creation was. See Octavio Paz (1990) *Appearance Stripped Bare*, New York. Duchamp, for his part saw the gesture as only the initiation of a process of continual creation that was taken up by unknown and unknowing future viewers: "In the last analysis, the artist may shout from all the rooftops that he is a genius: he will have to wait for the verdict of the spectator in order that his declarations take a social value and that, finally posterity includes him in the primers of Art History." Quoted in M. Sanouillet and E. Peterson (1973) *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, London: 138-39.



that the surface presentation of the world, of the artist's view of reality, was contingent. It was really no more than an hypothesis, but this fact was concealed by questions of form and medium, and that therefore this surface could like, a mask, be pulled off to reveal that all such 'hypotheses' were really no more than a series of 'just suppose' expressions. Duchamp's *delays* were also a perhaps, but they didn't pretend to be otherwise; they gloried in their ambiguity. Where painting was a safe bet, Duchamp now proposed to wager wildly.

In the conflation of circumstances that provide the background to Duchamp 'inscribing' these objects, the readymades, and in creating conditions where these objects might be appropriated, by eschewing traditional plastic creation, they were delivered to the artistic sphere, and given aesthetic status, by chance, not by intentionally adhering to conditions of artistic acceptance, which was normally construed as a component of autonomy, as seen for example in works of self-expression or mimesis.<sup>32</sup>

Once situated within the artistic realm the ambiguous objects become secluded from their own functional domain, and in this sense they are unlike any other objects of art, in so far as they turn the space of art into a playground. However, this is not in virtue of the objects taking on the appearance of toys; the readymades are disruptive because they are denials of a contextual understanding. And as playful creations that are only fully realised by the observer engaging in the play they remain forever suspended, existing only as a 'perhaps,' or as a Duchampian 'delay.' The implication of the *delay* consists in the fact that it brings us face to face with the ambiguity of appearances, the fact that things might not always be what they appear to be. Perhaps it is only by an act of cunning, of devious intent that they are only what someone calls them.

These objects, prior to the transforming 'inscription' merely had some rational purpose. Duchamp's first readymade was a bottle dryer that he purchased in 1914 (Plate 12). It remained a bottle dryer until 1915 when he wrote to his sister in Paris, explaining the significance of the object, and asked her then to paint an inscription on the bottom, and then sign it '[after] Marcel Duchamp.' By this act, it was decontextualised,

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<sup>32</sup> There have been recent claims that Duchamp's readymades were actually the product of a highly developed and conscious design. For example, it has been claimed that 'L. H.O.Q.Q', a modification of a Mona Lisa postcard in fact bears the image of Duchamp himself merged with the original work. See, 'Taking Jokes by Duchamp to Another Level of Art' by Sarah Boxer in *The New York Times* of March 20<sup>th</sup> 1999; 'Did Duchamp Deceive Us?' by Leslie Camhi in *ARTnews* of February 1999; and 'Mona Lisa: Who is Hidden Behind the Woman with the Moustache' in *Panorama* magazine of February 4<sup>th</sup> 1999.



differentiated, and given a unique status, by contrast with which their functional purpose consigned then to a lowly, banal and utilitarian place in the world.

Of all Duchamp's readymades, *Fountain* (1917), a mass produced urinal, turned upside down and finished off again with the signature of the artist, is the most notorious (Plate 13). As the first readymade to be brought to public attention this is the item which more than any other, changed the artistic landscape of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In contrast to some of the other readymades history suggests that there was a high level of planning involved in the public unveiling, and eventual reception of this object. And it is the play of the public appearance/non-appearance of this readymade that eventually unveils its shattering proclamation that one need not paint to be an artist, that anything goes. In order to achieve this effect Duchamp not only presented an object, under disguise, as it were, but he had to go to elaborate lengths to disguise his own identity as the artist behind *Fountain* – it bore the signature of a mysterious 'R. Mutt', later 'identified' as Richard Mutt.

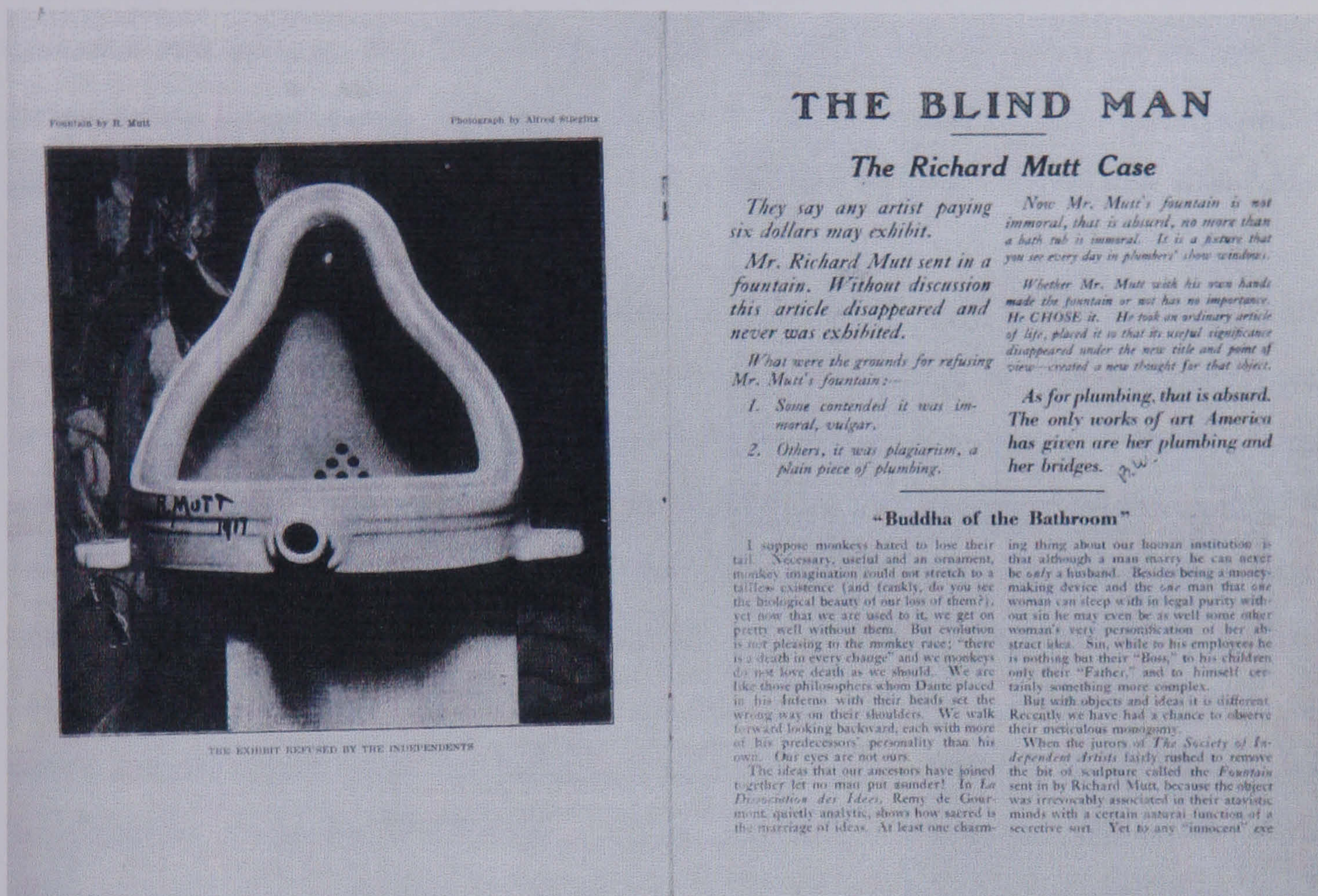
The first public display of *Fountain* was intended to be the exhibition of the American Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917, and although Duchamp was actually chairman of the hanging committee, not to mention being the juror behind two important decisions that affect how we understand the unveiling of *Fountain*, in the end it remained hidden – like Duchamp's identity as the real artist – veiled by a curtain and secluded, for the time being, from public view because the Society did not know what to make of it.<sup>33</sup> The duplicity of Duchamp's role in the whole affair is reinforced by the decisions he took as leader of the hanging committee for the exhibition.

Firstly, he decided that the works – and these numbered thousands – should be displayed in alphabetical order, thus eschewing conventional 'contextual' hanging practices, for example by chronology or by artistic school. The second important decision of the Society of Independents for this exhibition, one that Duchamp was also behind, was that there would be 'no jury, no prizes.' In the end, however, as *Fountain* was denied a place in the exhibition by the decision of what can only be described as a *jury*, we are led to conclude that this may have been just what Duchamp had hoped for.

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<sup>33</sup> See essays by William Camfield and Thierry De Duve in De Duve (ed) (1991) *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*. Cambridge, MA.





Fountain by R. Mutt

Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz

THE EXHIBIT REFUSED BY THE INDEPENDENTS

## THE BLIND MAN

### The Richard Mutt Case

They say any artist paying six dollars may exhibit.

Mr. Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion this article disappeared and never was exhibited.

What were the grounds for refusing Mr. Mutt's fountain:—

1. Some contended it was immoral, vulgar.
2. Others, it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing.

Now Mr. Mutt's fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bath tub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see every day in plumbers' show windows.

Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object.

As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges.

### "Buddha of the Bathroom"

I suppose monkeys hated to lose their tail. Necessary, useful and an ornament, monkey imagination could not stretch to a tailless existence (and frankly, do you see the biological beauty of our loss of them?), yet now that we are used to it, we get on pretty well without them. But evolution is not pleasing to the monkey race; "there is a death in every change" and we monkeys do not love death as we should. We are like those philosophers whom Dante placed in his Inferno with their heads set the wrong way on their shoulders. We walk forward looking backward, each with more of his predecessors' personality than his own. Our eyes are not ours.

The ideas that our ancestors have joined together let no man put asunder! In *La Dissociation des Idées*, Remy de Gourmont, quietly analytic, shows how sacred is the marriage of ideas. At least one charm-

ing thing about our human institution is that although a man marries he can never be *only* a husband. Besides being a money-making device and the one man that one woman can sleep with in legal purity without sin he may even be as well some other woman's very personification of her abstract idea. Sin, while to his employees he is nothing but their "Boss," to his children only their "Father," and to himself certainly something more complex.

But with objects and ideas it is different. Recently we have had a chance to observe their mercurious monogamy.

When the jurors of *The Society of Independent Artists* fairly rushed to remove the bit of sculpture called the *Fountain* sent in by Richard Mutt, because the object was irrevocably associated in their atavistic minds with a certain natural function of a secretive sort. Yet to any "innocent" eye

PLATE 13. THE RICHARD MUTT CASE, 1917. This was a defence of *Fountain* and its 'creator' R. Mutt. The object had been denied a place in the American Society of Independents exhibition in 1917 because it was not art. The open letter to the Society — published as 'Buddha of the Bathroom' — was anonymously authored (although it is thought to be by Duchamp himself) and published as an editorial in *The Blind Man*. Near the end of his life Duchamp told Pierre Cabanne that he had written the name 'R. Mutt' on the urinal to "avoid connection with the personal" and that the scandal was intensified because the organisers, through gossip, suspected he had sent the object, although circumstances decreed that this was something he could not confirm. See Pierre Cabanne, 1971, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*: p. 55.



By presenting an object that was unidentifiable within an art context, Duchamp revealed that the idea of the jury is merely the social manifestation of a subjective inability to remain indifferent as observers, and of our tendency to stick with what we know, that which can be assigned a place in some order. The ambiguity of *Fountain* could not be allowed to dwell over the exhibition, the jury decided, and so it was excluded and with it, the difficult questions over the Society's openness to new art. Nevertheless, the excluded object did overtake events as Duchamp, again anonymously, published a defence of the readymade in an issue of a magazine called *The Blind Man* (Plate 13).

As well as sending in the object under the name of Richard Mutt, Duchamp took the ruse to extreme lengths by fooling friends who were fellow members of the Society of Independents, and others such as the influential gallery owner and dealer Alfred Steiglitz, who took the famous photograph of *Fountain*, believing it to be the work of R. Mutt. Duchamp even withheld his true role in the affair from his own sister Suzanne, to whom he wrote, "One of my female friends under a masculine pseudonym, Richard Mutt, sent in a porcelain urinal as a sculpture."<sup>34</sup> As Thierry de Duve has shown, the entire scandal of the American Independents show, and the case of Richard Mutt, was an elaborate set-up by Duchamp, a test to see how accurate was the claim of the Independents that any artist who paid the fee of six dollars could display their work. Ostensibly, this democratic condition removed aesthetic hierarchies, although as Duchamp was to discover, this attitude was simply a front. In effect, the members of the American Society of Independents had a well-formed idea of what could be shown in an art context, and this did not include the profane *Fountain*.<sup>35</sup>

The readymade and the ambiguity over its role and meaning, effectively throws our attention onto something else in order to try and grasp meaning, to answer the unavoidable 'what is it' question it seems to provoke. It is impossible to explore this without confronting the question of identity. The ontological status of identity as both a principle of correspondence and individuation, an apparent duality that conceals that, in

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<sup>34</sup> See Thierry De Duve (1998) *ibid*: 104.

<sup>35</sup> See William Camfield, 'Duchamp's Fountain: Aesthetic Object, Icon, or Anti-Art?' in De Duve (1991): 133-84. Camfield recounts the controversy surrounding this show, and the object in question. *Fountain* was signed 'R. Mutt' and submitted anonymously. Duchamp, scenting controversy over the item, was able to retain his detached position on the Board of Directors of the exhibition, whilst observing the fate of his 'sculpture'. It was excluded on the grounds that it was 'not art' after a vote by the Board. This despite the protestations of Walter Arensberg, another



actual fact, identification by one means is at the same time the negative performance of the other. The readymade object itself, therefore, still raises important questions about the objective identity that art is presumed to establish between the artist and the work on the one hand, and something that produces the creative impulse on the other – the identity that presumably brings together, and unifies discrete phenomena.<sup>36</sup> It is worth pursuing another aspect of identity before that, and that is the one that arises specifically as a result of the medium of artistic creation, resulting from Duchamp's abandonment of painting. His break with the past might be understood in another way, and I would suggest it provided Duchamp an opportunity to explore identity – even being – by hiding behind a variety of disguises, and that this was a matter of interest to him for a long time before and after 1912.

*Etcetry etcetry...*

Duchamp adopted at least two significant disguises in the pursuit of his art (but many more on various occasions throughout his life). He was 'Rose Sélavy,' supplier of 'whiskers and kicks,' of puns and pranks (Plate 14). As we have seen he was also, notoriously, 'R. Mutt,' the 'R' of which, Richard, it has been suggested can be read as 'moneybags' from the French *richard*. 'Mutt,' the other part of the name suggests an equally devious play on expectations, it being associated with practical jokes as the name of the one half of a well-known cartoon duo, 'Mutt and Jeff.'<sup>37</sup> In fact some members of the Society of Independents had a problem with *Fountain* merely because of the name of the 'artist' – R. Mutt. Given Duchamp's predilection for punning, which he expressed in the titles of many of the readymades, it is not surprising that there is an insatiable search for hidden meaning in all his sayings and doings, and this is part of the play that still continues, Huizinga's 'visible action' that surrounds all his creations.

Duchamp's recourse to disguise marks a significant divergence in the modern tradition, which was built on the self-critical autonomy of the artist. In the case of *Fountain* it took a disguise to reveal the mask of the art world, of reality, but also, as we have seen the readymade challenged the idea of artistic autonomy. No matter the uneasy

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Board member, "A lovely form has been created, freed from its functional purpose, therefore a man has clearly made an aesthetic contribution."

<sup>36</sup> Identity in this sense is further explored in chapter 10, below.

<sup>37</sup> See Jerrold Seigel (1995) *ibid*: 136. See also Thierry de Duve (1998) *ibid*: chapter two.





PLATE 14. MARCEL DUCHAMP AS RROSE SÉLAVY, Man Ray, 1921. Employing disguise, Duchamp was taking questions of identity explored through the readymade and placing a question mark over everything created by the Rose Sélavy *persona* — for example, if the work was intended to be authentic why would he not add his real name to it? As with the Richard Mutt disguise in 1917, the ambiguity of the disguise serves only to confuse, although we may suggest that Duchamp was not merely playing around here. As A. David Napier notes: “*ambiguity* remains fundamental to change despite any claims we might make about inferred, innate, or even empirically perceived identity, and disguise is, in our ontological experience, the primary way of expressing this ambiguity. The use of disguise is thus conducive both to make-believe and to changes of state that are imputed to be real.” See A. David Napier, 1986, *Masks, Transformation and Paradox*: p. 3.



developments in painting since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was still definable by the autonomy and objectivity of artistic control (expression) and a re-presentation, or re-arranging of the world (mimesis). However, as much as these painters posed a threat to tradition and to confining notions of taste (characterised by a demand for pictorial representation on the part of the art world), there still remained the inevitable materialization of the aesthetic impulse, the painting or sculpture (the *matter* that is the precise limitation on play as given in Huizinga's definition), as the only means of expression.<sup>38</sup>

The most shattering revolution in the history of modern art was the declaration that the reality that works of art represented, or signified, was merely a world re-arranged, effectively masked, to reflect a variety of ideal worlds. The readymade introduced the uneasy truth that it is we who objectify the world. Antoine Compagnon observed that by decontextualising the object and giving it a title Duchamp had:

Carried to its highest point pictorial nominalism, that is, the substitution of the linguistic for the plastic in art, or of the discourse on art for the art object, ever silent in its revolt and therefore subject to appropriation.<sup>39</sup>

The art object, established by naming, that is to say, contingently, could take on an infinite number of meanings. Not only did it not exist within a frame; in its boundlessness it couldn't be contained by the logic of an ordering mind, slotted into a neat box, as the product of yet another of modernism's 'isms.' Within the plastic tradition of modernism, form and stylistic considerations still betrayed the legacy of conventions. While Cubism, for example, in its broken representation of the phenomenal world certainly revealed consciousness of a world lacking fixity, a chancy world where partial perspectives became the only way of now representing the fragmentary nature of social life, not to mention the 'life' of the mind, it was still mediated using the same tools, and threw-up the same expectations of 'picturing' that painting was unable to escape.

After dabbling with Cubism, Duchamp, by contrast, had felt the need to move beyond painting to make his own revolutionary break with the past.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, apparently

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<sup>38</sup> I recognise that painting too went beyond these physical boundaries of the frame, for example in Jackson Pollock's departure from the stretched canvas and easel painting. Clement Greenberg may have something to say on this. Pollock probably wasn't the first in this regard, either.

<sup>39</sup> See Compagnon (1994) *ibid*: 101.

<sup>40</sup> Duchamp's most famous painting, 'Nude Descending a Staircase No.2,' achieved notoriety after his abandonment of painting, but was of course, completed before the first readymade. It has been noted that this



not content with anything less than the destruction of taste, he identified painting itself as an obstacle to freeing the artistic desire for self-expression, and declared it finished, 'washed up'.<sup>41</sup>

The unacceptability of *Fountain* demonstrated that the norms that held the art world together could prevent anything not recognisably identifiable in the terms of 'art' from being brought before the public. In the case of the readymades, this is not to suggest sinister motives, nor even that there was some 'priesthood' protecting the truth (although this latter is perhaps closer to the mark). It is rather that the ambiguity of the readymade object, and this is particularly true with regard to *Fountain*, made it as shocking, as unexpected, as a turd on Wedgwood china – the refusal of this object was the vindication of Duchamp's ruse. Having created the conditions to test the bounds of the artistic with his negative rule of 'no jury, no prizes' Duchamp then tested this with the upturned urinal, and discovered that the art establishment could not cope with the apparent meaninglessness of such an object. In fact one member of the Independent's committee, surely not realizing how prophetic his views would be, was reported to have declared that if *Fountain* was accepted, anything would go, right down to a heap of dung on canvas.<sup>42</sup>

History shows that these fears were only too real. One thinks of the scandals that still erupt over contemporary works like Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987), an image of Christ on the cross, made by photographing a crucifix in a glass of urine, or Chris Ofili's equally blasphemous *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1999) a figure of the virgin created with elephant dung. Art was supposed to connect with something eternal or sacred, not the profanity of corporeality. The obscenity of works like this, works that are more pictorially conventional, rely on the same Duchampian principle of mixing forbidden contexts to allow the fullest level of contingency in meaning.

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painting is probably the first expression of Duchamp's nominalism. See, for example Antoine Compagnon (1994) *ibid*: 99, and Thierry de Duve (1996) *Pictorial Nominalism*, Minneapolis. The author suggests that the refusal of the Paris Independents, and specifically the Cubists, to accept *Nude Descending a Staircase* in 1912 because of its title, was what pushed Duchamp toward abandoning painting later that year. See also Calvin Tomkins (1998) *ibid*: 75-84: "a Cubist nude that is also a machine clanking down an abstract flight of stairs proved to be altogether too much for the Puteaux Cubists, in whose theoretical deliberations – as Duchamp must have known -- there was not much room for eroticism or for humor."

<sup>41</sup> On seeing an airplane propeller at an Aviation show Duchamp remarked to the sculptor Constantin Brancusi: "Painting's washed up. Who'll do anything better than that propeller? Tell me, can you do that?" Sanouillet and Peterson, *ibid*: 160.

<sup>42</sup> This is retold in Ades, et al (1999) *ibid*: 128.



*Fountain* had introduced the notion of disguise on a number of levels. Firstly the question of authenticity arises because it was not the plastic creation of the artist; in its normal context it is merely a copy, one amongst many – it was a mass-produced industrial object, a urinal. Secondly, the title was deliberately disjunctive in that it did not designate or signify a proper referent – it functioned in the objective world as a urinal; that is to say, a urinal is a receptacle that receives liquid, whilst the normal interpretation of the word that gives the object its title suggests that with the object itself the direction of the flow is reversed – a fountain projects liquid.<sup>43</sup> Of course, it functioned in neither of these ways, and so the title was another instance of Duchamp's nominalism.

Finally, with this particular readymade the artist not only does not create the object, but he employs a pseudonym to present it to the public. Implicitly, this move denies conventional creative responsibility for the object. Which could be interpreted – were it not for the elements of disguise – as demonstrating an honesty about the creation of this particular work, in so far as it is a fabricated item rather than the result of plastic creation, one of many more similar 'mass' objects, made anonymous by their ubiquity. So, by employing a disguise to conceal his identity as the creator of the object, Duchamp not only cloaks himself, but by doing so gives the object a new characteristic because his disguise was his licence to break taboos, and where as a mere functional object it would have been impossible to differentiate it from the numerous other urinals.

The principle of taking a mass-produced object and performing some alteration was repeated with Duchamp's equally notorious re-contextualising of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. In this case the transformation was achieved by taking a cheap postcard reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*, readily available in 1919 as this was the four hundredth anniversary of the Leonardo's death, to which a moustache and goatee beard were added, along with an enigmatic acronym written in beneath the image, spelling out *L.H.O.O.Q.* (Plate 15). This was the title by which this curiosity was known, another pun that continued Duchamp's practice of upsetting of various representational expectations – to be precise, image, word and sound resemblances. If the letters are spoken in French the effect is to

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<sup>43</sup> See Ades, et al (1999) *ibid.* And Jerrold Seigel, *ibid.*, who suggests that when "extracted from its context and turned so that it cannot be used as intended, the urinal has become a female presence forever removed from the male action that would bring it into the world." (120)



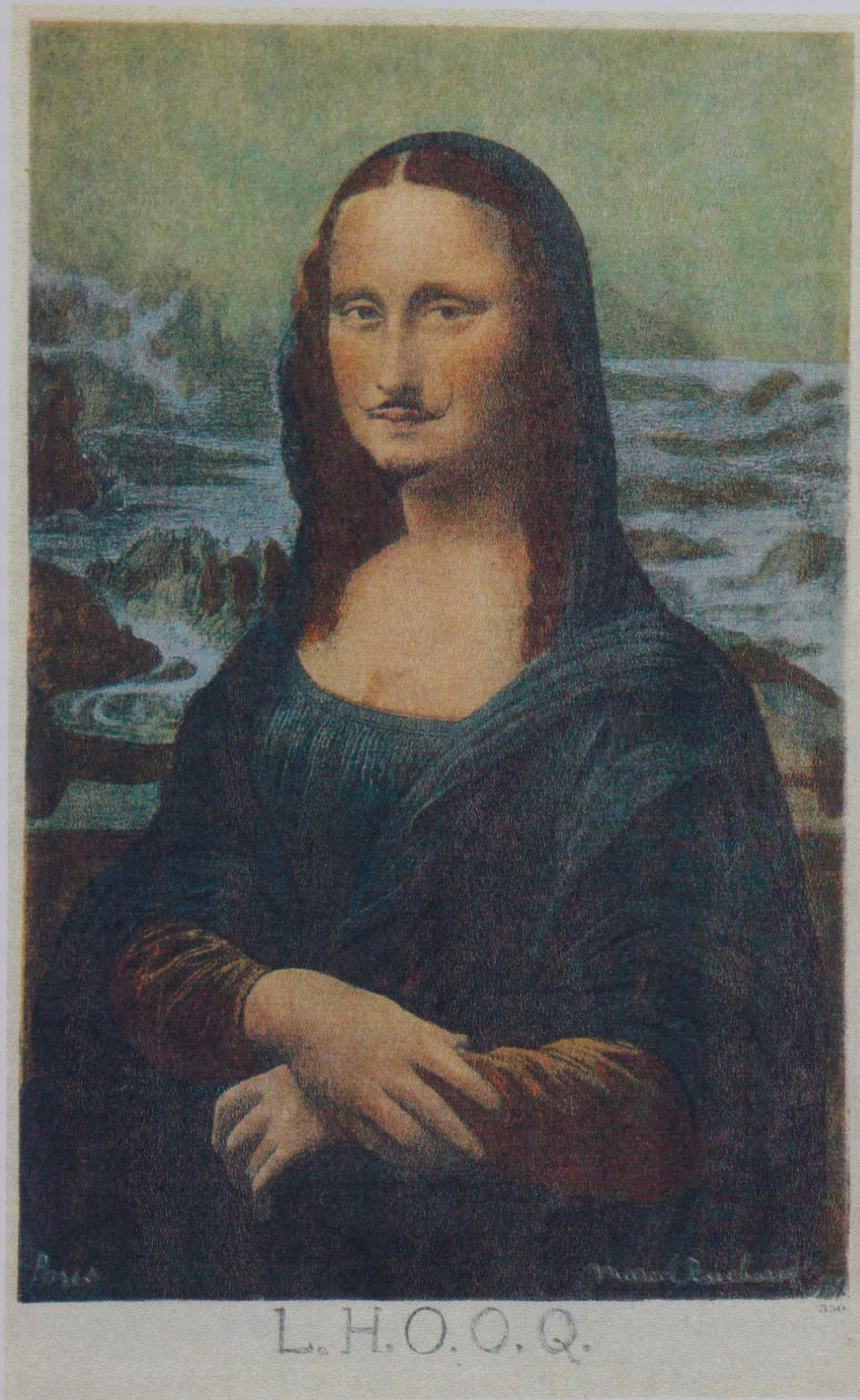


PLATE 15. L.H.O.O.Q., Marcel Duchamp, 1919. This was what Duchamp would call a 'readymade-aided' — an object found and then slightly altered. This postcard was modified by the addition of a few pen marks to the face, making ambiguous the gender of the subject, and the equally confusing legend 'L.H.O.O.Q.' The impact of this item has been out of all proportion to Duchamp's almost throwaway gesture (it was recovered from a box in Duchamp's apartment by André Breton, who then published it). As far as posterity is concerned, however, the gesture is not, as Octavio Paz said "plastic but critical or philosophical [...the readymades] are not creations but signs, questioning or negating the act of creation." See Octavio Paz, 1990, *Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare*. p.22



produce the sound of an expression something like 'elle a chaud au cul', which, in English means 'she has a hot ass.' Thus, by first adding the beard and moustache Duchamp seemed to redefine the gender of Leonardo's *Gioconda*, yet the play on word sounds given in the title threw this revised expectation back in the face of the observer by saying that this figure looked like it might be a man, but 'she had a hot ass.'

But this 'assisted readymade,' by taking the found object and making a slight alteration to it, also, like *Fountain* before it, hides something else – the artistic or aesthetic intention, a mask that as Jerrold Seigel suggests covers the considerable depth of Duchamp's 'inner world.'<sup>44</sup> This 'inner world' is a fluid world of imagination and play, the home of a mind that could not remain at rest, that constantly slid back and forth between one potential meaning of a sign and another, giving birth to "multiple significations where conventional expectations did not suggest any."<sup>45</sup>

Again, with these objects, their titles, and in Duchamp's own role, there are layers upon layers of masks and hidden meanings, the contingency of which is displaced by the continual veiling and unveiling, only to be redoubled or inflated beyond calculation by a play of identities that actually destroys the very possibility of identity.

Duchamp took this to a further extreme by creating a female alter ego, Rose Sélavy in 1920, publishing many puns, and indulging in visual trickery, in the production of fake consumer products for example, objects like his altered *Mona Lisa* that were 'assisted readymades.' These were objects that realised a further elaboration of the masking that had begun with the disjunction between object and title found in the earlier readymades, and under the Rose Sélavy persona the *prima facie* veracity of our powers of discrimination are challenged by objects that were dressed up in elaborate packages with punning titles that look, on the face of it, like genuine products. 'Belle Haleine, Eau du Voilette' one reads, leading us once again into the play (Plate 16). Bearing the image of Rose Sélavy, the object looks like it could be a bottle of expensive perfume, but the ambiguity of the label suggests all is now what it seems. It may be translated as 'beautiful breath, veil water.' 'Water disguised'? Or perhaps, 'vile water for beautiful breath'?<sup>46</sup> No matter, the play could continue endlessly without agreement.

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<sup>44</sup> Seigel, *ibid*: 140.

<sup>45</sup> Seigel, *ibid*: 120.

<sup>46</sup> Some suggest that this, taken with the de-feminising of the *Mona Lisa* reveals something like an inherent androgyny in Duchamp. See Ades, et al (1999) *ibid*: 134.



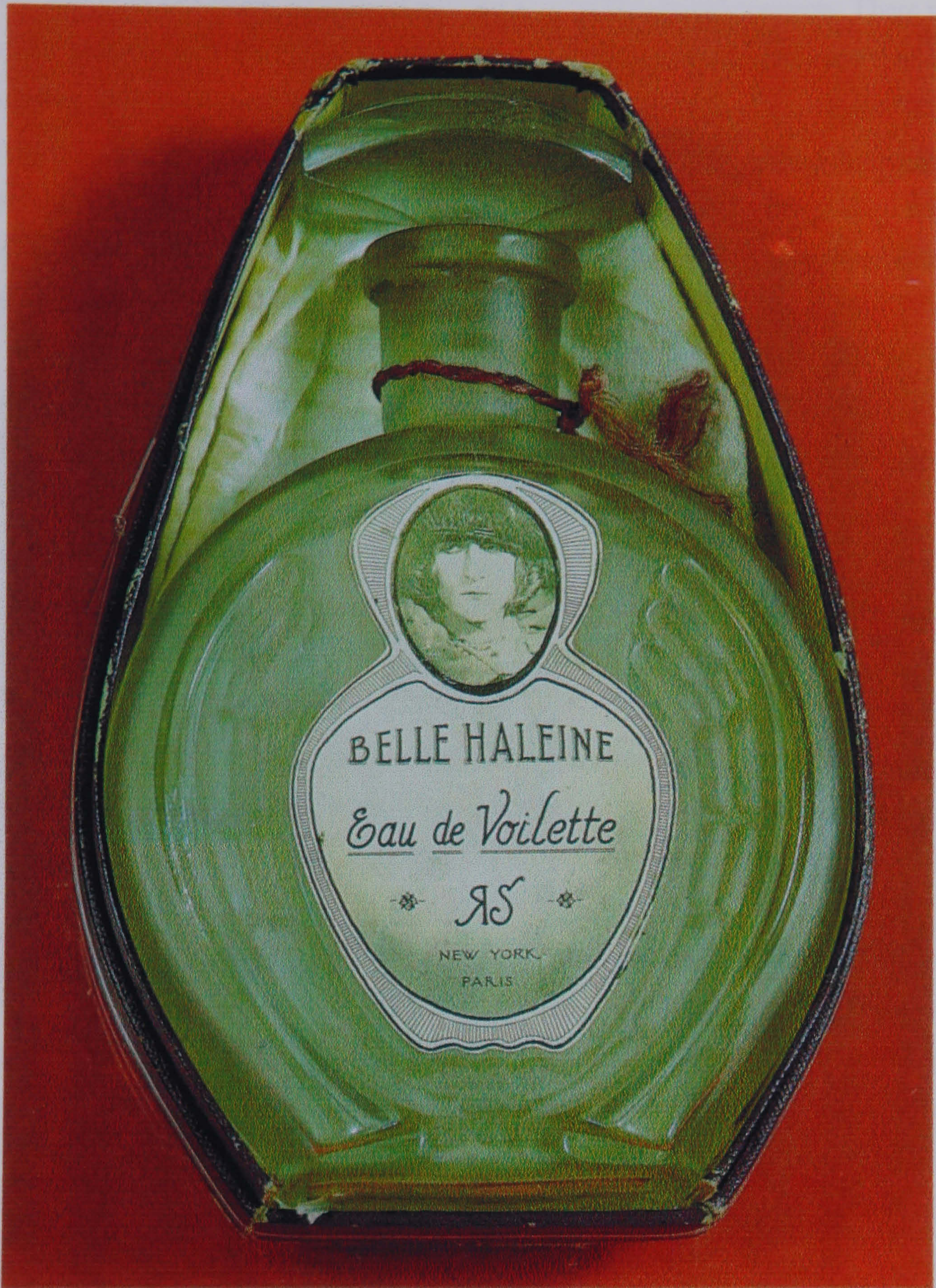


PLATE 16. BELLE HALEINE, EAU du VOILETTE, Rose Sélavy/Marcel Duchamp, 1921. Here, again, is another example of the ambiguity of the object. Given the evident care that has gone into the making of this object it is not too difficult to see that it could be taken for the genuine article, although the punning description of this 'product' is the giveaway (*belle haleine, eau du voilette* — translates as 'beautiful breath, veil water'). It is interesting as well that Duchamp should fake a *fragrance*, because, as we know, such perfumes also conceal the natural odor or the human body. Which is to say, in other words, that he has disguised a form of the product that manifests the most elementary modern disguise.



The crucial aspect of the revolutionary impact of the readymades is in the way in which Duchamp, like no one else, takes art into the realm of play. Modern painters before and after Duchamp still operated from an aesthetic of *self-expression*. There is still the idea that physical contact with the materials of painting is what makes a true artist. Duchamp and some notable successors sought, in a way, to undermine the rational autonomy of the artist with play and irony, reaching for some depth below the apparently honest face of the art world, a depth that compromised the skin-deep surface, itself a mask created by a *prima facie* 'maybe,' by certain framed or masked relations; in other words by an rearrangement of the object world.

The readymade initiated a radical *missorting* of the world, the artistic cosmos. "If the centre is in a state of permanent schism, if the ancient notions of solid matter and clear and distinct reason disappear," Octavio Paz wrote. "The result is general disorientation, Duchamp's intention is to get rid forever of 'the possibility of recognizing any two things as being like each other.'"<sup>47</sup> But maybe more crucially than the destructive intention of Duchamp's 'statements' this art gloried in a subjective indifference to the world; it said that we should just forget about meaning in art having anything to do with the artist. Like the weather it rather has something more to do with chance. Of all his work, this attitude was most evident in the readymades, which almost single-handedly removed the elevation of skill and of the concern with form as the basis of a self-critical modernism, indeed the removal of the creative act as it had come to be understood.

Instead, the role of creativity was pushed onto the beholder; and the 'creative acts' – that is, onto the interpretive act, which is constantly renewed – became as myriad, as unpredictable, and as indivisible as the quanta of the physical world.<sup>48</sup> Certainly by redefining and legitimizing a new kind of artistic 'creativity' the readymades uncovered a world of seemingly discrete objects, pulled together, framed, by chance identifications. It is with the use of the decontextualised object that we find a move away from plasticity and towards the accidental forms of natural, and particularly, man-made functional objects. Chance, here, operates at the level of creation, but as Duchamp said, the object is only truly created by overcoming the delay that separates the two poles that resolve its

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<sup>47</sup> See Octavio Paz (1970) *ibid*: 10.

<sup>48</sup> Compagnon (1994) *ibid*: 102, also makes this point.





PLATE 17. WANTED/\$2000 REWARD. Marcel Duchamp, 1923. According to Victor I. Stoichita, Duchamp masks the conventional *dialogue* of the mug-shot, which is given by having the side view look towards the frontal view as if “the person’s identity were thought to be engaged in the stimulating conversation of a schize [...] Duchamp unveils the illusion: what we see is a disrupted representation, a representation where the mould of the double mug-shot introduces a concealed but significant breach, a representation that does not promote an affirmation of identity but of false identity.” See Victor I. Stoichita, 1997, *A Short History of the Shadow*. p. 226-27.



objective ambiguity.

The denial of expression through painting was taken up more frequently in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with artists such as Robert Rauschenberg drawing together materials from seemingly incompatible contexts to form something new. In Rauschenberg's case his *combines* utilised 'accidental' materials and objects.<sup>49</sup>

Whilst we know of Duchamp's adoption of disguise mostly with regard to R. Mutt and Rose Sélavy, the fascinating thing about Duchamp is that these were not isolated moments, but that after 1912 and with his abandonment of painting, disguises came to characterise most of the rest of his life as an artist. As Thierry de Duve explains, he was also "*Marcel Douxami, Marsélavy, and Sélatz*, not to mention the ersatz names he was given by others: *Victor* and *Totor* by Henri-Pierre Roché, *Marchand du sel* by Robert Desnos, *Pierre Delaire* by Henri Waste."<sup>50</sup> A final act in this unstable existence is found in the *Wanted* poster of 1923 (Plate 17), an imitation of a police circular featuring Duchamp posing as a criminal, 'George W. Welch' alias 'Bull' alias 'Pickens' *etcetry etcetry*, it goes on. The police mugshot, with its depiction of the full face and side profile was supposed to supply the final means of identification – whilst the name might change the physiognomic features remained relatively recognisable. Perhaps the truth is – although to speak of truth here is presumptuous – that once Duchamp gave up painting, and thus the kind of self-expression that could be understood, recognised, he no longer knew, or cared who he was. When asked once to find a way of conveying what his work meant, Duchamp said that the only word he could find to describe his work was 'metaphysical.' His work, he said, was:

Pushing the idea of doubt [found] in Descartes...to a much further point than they ever did in the school of Cartesianism: doubt in myself, doubt in everything...in the end it comes to doubt the verb 'to be'<sup>51</sup>

The verb that identifies through equivalence, that designates also exclusion, the 'what is not' of belonging, the '=', the 'is' that relates the contingent relation of its own identity, because 'to be' is also to not yet be...something else.

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<sup>49</sup> This is not to downplay the role of Cubism in establishing the framework in which the assemblage of incongruous elements, objects, etc., allowing the later move away from 'retinal art' as Duchamp called all art (with some exceptions) to conceptual art. Harriet Ann Watts (1980), gives a good overview of the importance of Cubism in challenging conventional aesthetics.

<sup>50</sup> Thierry De Duve (1998) *ibid*: 399-400.

<sup>51</sup> See Ades, et al (1999) *ibid*: 61



## 9 A Poetics of Coincidence

Minimal incoherent fragments:  
the opposite of History, creator of ruins,  
out of your ruins you have made creations.

OCTAVIO PAZ, *Objects and Apparitions*

‘Spiders and salamanders’ sit next to the obscurely labelled ‘mouse materials,’ ‘old fish marbles,’ and ‘love letters: Jennifer Jones.’ A snapshot of the shelves in Joseph Cornell’s workshop taken by Hans Namuth in 1969 reveals something of the curiosity that drove the artist to amass a vast storehouse of the banal and kitsch, items connected only in his imaginary world. These were collected and brought together in his unusual and fascinating wooden box constructions, which housed the final order he would bring to the seemingly random assortment of items recovered from the shelves of his workshop: the labels on other boxes do little to satisfy the interest of the viewer – ‘Caravaggio, etc.’ ‘pegs’ and ‘best white boxes’ – and only partially unveil the world of this enigmatic, perhaps reluctant, artist.<sup>1</sup> (Plate 18)

In his box constructions Joseph Cornell takes the apparently random – objects that bear no association except within the context in which they are presented – and brings them together portraying a form of some imaginary world. In doing this he is arguably doing no more than extending a centuries old tradition of framing a world, or a portion of the world.<sup>2</sup> That is to say that in tradition the painting, as well, merely frames a world, although perhaps traditionally less often with such conceptually or spatially unconnected objects brought within the bounded space of a single ‘representation.’ The

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<sup>1</sup> See Dore Ashton (1974) *A Joseph Cornell Album*, New York: “As early as 1936 he responded unabashedly to the Museum of Modern Art’s biographical inquiry: EDUCATION – Went to Andover. No art instruction. Natural talent [...] Twenty-four years later he was saying, ‘I never called myself an artist. On voter registration I call myself a designer.’” (4)

<sup>2</sup> On the history of three-dimensional boxes see Alex Mogelan and Norman Laliberte (1974) *Art in Boxes*, New York. Cf. also the tradition of collecting in early modernity. For example, Paula Findlen (1994) *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Europe*. Berkeley





PLATE 18. JOSEPH CORNELL'S WORKSHOP, Hans Namuth, 1969. According to Kynaston McShine, Cornell treated the "ephemeral object as if it were the rarest heirloom of a legendary prince or princess [...] a necklace from Woolworth's had as much value as one from Fabergé." See K. McShine (ed), 1980, *Joseph Cornell*: pp.10-11. Cornell categorised and labeled this material in 162 dossiers, some of which ran to 1,000 pages, others to only a few. "The Dossiers," Lindsay Blair writes, "reveal an almost bewildering eclecticism and rampant associationism, so personal and complicated was the nature of the connections [he] made." See Lindsay Blair, 1998, *Joseph Cornell's Vision of Spiritual Order*: p.26.



mystery deepens because unlike Surrealism, with which Cornell has been associated, he did not deal with images of distorted perception, or with 'objects' that were not readily identifiable as something we might experience in the course of the everyday.<sup>3</sup> The point was that Cornell's objects *were* the everyday – often the crushingly boring objects that form the small and overlooked aspects of, for example, lost childhood; he gathers together the kind of objects that are, through the course of a life, either packed away or thrown away; these, in other words, are useless mementos belonging to a distant past. These items are all, nevertheless, things we can usually recognise when taken on their own – a child's marble, a jar, a seashell, the building blocks of a learning game – although the presentation of these items in the final object lose any association they may have had individually (Plate 19), and become overwhelmed by the association that arises in the mind of the viewer. This untitled box, completed over several years in the mid-1950's, resonates to the muted sound of loss, the thought of persons missing.

One particularly unusual aspect of Cornell's boxes of these apparently abandoned objects is that the once individuated items that make up the whole do not appear to belong together – a map of the moon forms the backdrop of a box that contains a clay pipe, the disembodied head of a child figure, a glass containing an egg, a representation of the Tower of Pisa with Saturn hovering over (*Untitled Soap Bubble Set*, 1936) – there are many more similarly enigmatic creations. The objects in combination here occur neither rationally nor naturally, the collections presented do not, therefore, represent anything one would expect to encounter in the course of the everyday. Artists had since the Renaissance until around the end of the nineteenth century created objects that appeared 'orderly,' appeared to mimic nature, yet that were revealed to be manifestations of an arbitrary order as reason discovered an unruly and indeterminate nature that was not at all as necessary or uniform as conventional artistic representation might have led one to believe. What Cornell reveals to the world in these boxes is, by contrast, a self-created order, and thus the *coincidence* of the disconnected objects belonging together inside one of these boxes is only finally established as a consequence of the presence of a beholding eye.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rosalind Krauss (1980) 'Joseph Cornell's Transcendental Surrealism,' in McShine, Kynaston (ed) (1980) *Joseph Cornell*. New York.





PLATE 19. UNTITLED, Joseph Cornell, mid-1950's. One of Joseph Cornell's many "poetic enactments" as Dore Ashton calls them: "the visible issue of this palace of dreams and associations [...] his mind, like a shell spiraled to infinity." See Dore Ashton, 1974, *A Joseph Cornell Album*: pp.1-2. The date on this, and many other boxes, remained indeterminate because Cornell would tinker with them for years. Deborah Solomon noted that: "It is often said of artists that they live in fear of being misunderstood, Cornell, by contrast, lived in fear of being understood." (Quoted in Lindsay Blair, 1998, *Joseph Cornell's Vision of Spiritual Order*: p.20) Dawn Ades, on the other hand, suggests that Cornell's anxiety over his boxes lay in his feeling that the "ramifications of the subjects of his boxes" could not be expressed, adding that the difficulty of translation lies in the radical subjectivity of his work: "all his boxes are perhaps sailor's chests, containing his souvenirs of an imaginary voyage." See Dawn Ades, 'The Transcendental Surrealism of Joseph Cornell' in K. McShine (ed), 1980, *Joseph Cornell*: p.39.



For Cornell these were far from accidental creations. Over many years he would collect these knick-knacks, which were organised and recorded according to a staggeringly detailed, yet mysterious, working method that has since been recovered from the many 'dossiers' he left behind.<sup>4</sup> With the peculiar precision of his working methods on the one hand, and the apparently arbitrary or 'unnatural' ordering of phenomena within the boxes (to the viewer) on the other, a gap opens up in our understanding; between the perception of a seemingly coincidental assortment of items, and the subjective, cognitive power of artistic association.

In this latter sense, Cornell's work follows closely the tradition of Duchamp – particularly in stripping objects of any prior value (the value may have been negative, considering the objects used were usually cheap), and also in the use of more or less recognisable objects in unusual contexts. Presumably, he imagined the gaze of the viewer in meeting the object might realise some Duchampian *rendezvous*.<sup>5</sup> And this also allows one to view Cornell within a larger post-Duchamp tradition (or anti-tradition if you like) in the twentieth century that produces works that were, in a sense, gratuitous, or arbitrary, but crucially this latter quality only applies to the viewer. And so, to the beholder of, for example, a Joseph Cornell box construction a gap is opened that separates art object and reality, artist and world. And it is into this gap that the artist moves in making the object public, and into which the viewer must move in order to make a connection.

### *The Doubtful Coincidence*

Cornell offers one example of a balance many artists in the twentieth century maintained between order and disorder, moving to and fro between the two conditions because of the necessity that the artist – in creating this gap between object and reality – to a significant extent loses power over the work of art. To find a public (something that Cornell at times gambled on only reluctantly)<sup>6</sup> is, in other words, to relinquish the meaning of a painting, and thus to accept that the work as presented to posterity, in its actual *existence*, does not represent some timeless truth, but is instead a partial and

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<sup>4</sup> See Lindsay Blair (1998) *Joseph Cornell's Vision of Spiritual Order*, London. Blair gives a selection of the labels Cornell pasted on his dossiers: "Journey Album; Museum Without Walls; Metaphysique d'Ephemera; Portrait Encasement; Center of a Labyrinth; Childhood Regained," and so on (26-27).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. previous chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Lindsay Blair, *ibid*.



fragmentary act of creation. Plastic creation does not, then, enact a 'peeling back' of some veil of perception to reveal, in the object, a reality that has been there all along. What is more like the case is that the requirement of a viewer becomes a mark of the artist's residence in, finally, a world of contingency. This need, when indulged, must be interpreted as the acceptance that something fundamentally unfinished is released to posterity.

Yet the history of modern art is a history of self-denial, not a history of acceptance. On the contrary, it is characterised by revolutions that overturn the warm embrace of the acceptable gestures that are then set against the viewer as a challenge. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* of 1917, as well as being the point of departure for the art under consideration here, also provides a good example of how a public is eventually brought round to something close to accepting an object that had initially stood in a relationship of contradiction to the ordering that facilitates acceptance.

This particular object – in being far from *given* – can thus also be seen to have evolved to the position it now occupies through a series of improbable coincidences – through initial discovery (the scandal of 1917), then loss (almost forgotten after the rise of Abstract Expressionism), and discovery again (adoption of Duchamp as an influence by 'Neo-Dada' in the 1950's and 1960's).<sup>7</sup> In other words this object had (and has) a 'life' way beyond its initial public unveiling, one that extends beyond what the temporally located, embodied eye, can see. Yet, even as one recognises the contemporary acceptance of *Fountain* it still remains axiomatic that in spite of its iconic status no one can actually agree on something as apparently basic as *what it means* or *what it is*.<sup>8</sup>

Observing that a work of art is the product of two defining 'poles' Duchamp had accepted that this response would await *Fountain*. One pole is the artist, the maker of the material object and the other the beholder who at some time and place unspecified *looks* at it, and thus in an act of almost Berkeleyan perceptiveness, confirms its existence.<sup>9</sup> In therefore assaulting the traditional subject-object 'picture' version of realism, in which

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<sup>7</sup> See chapter eight, above.

<sup>8</sup> This is because, as Octavio Paz observed, the status of this object is in its function as a question mark suspended permanently over the notion of creation itself, and thus not without coincidence, how the beholder of such 'creations' identifies, or draws meaning from the object world. See Octavio Paz (1990) *Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare*, New York.

<sup>9</sup> See Pierre Cabanne (1971) *Dialogues With Marcel Duchamp*, London: 70. Speaking to Cabanne in the 1960's, Duchamp still believed that no artist would accept this view that art was made ultimately, somehow, by an absurdly democratic sleight of hand. But the history of art, by contrast, he saw as 'pruning' reality to create the great canon of art. "To talk about truth and real, absolute judgement – I don't believe in it at all."



truth is apparently *given*, or unveiled, Duchamp suggested that these poles constitute a more or less indeterminate whole, that truth arises in the non-place of the gap in between these two poles, with the consequent meaning being entirely contingent, and not at all given.<sup>10</sup> The two poles, he believed, were separated by the ‘delay’ that interrupts the eventual, defining, rendezvous of viewer meeting object. Which is to say that the viewer has a significant collaborative role to play; that the object is ‘finished’ by the viewer, thus creating a somewhat fleeting and insubstantial object that becomes, conceptually reminiscent of a Leibnizian *monad* – possessed of “no parts [it] can neither be formed nor destroyed. [It] can neither begin nor end naturally, and consequently [it will] last as long as the universe.”<sup>11</sup> However, unlike monads, these objects ‘die away’ with each new viewer, although this is also the condition of the eternal and indeterminate existence of the object-in-waiting. The physical object itself is thus merely a sign that has no real referent beyond what it is to the viewer – it is, objectively, a sign of a sign, if you like.<sup>12</sup>

This characterisation of the *making* of art as the result of the coincidental meeting of object and viewer is nevertheless a defiant, if apparently self-negating, trait of the modern artist. Art objects that follow after Duchamp’s readymades are often embodied as incomplete, non-representational, objects, which can have no other fate than to be renewed against their own partial being by the participation of the viewer, thus the gesture of the artist is always suspended, awaiting the doubtful coincidence.

The imaginative ‘core’ of such art then also emerges from a poetics of coincidence, by which I mean that loose ‘arrangement’ of unlikely or unforeseeable convergences that amount to the ‘life’ of the art object is *the* background against which the artist – by contrast – determinedly produces his creations before they are lost to the world. The kind of objects that find a place within the ordered procession of Art History (within

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<sup>10</sup> Duchamp’s final work was titled *Given 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas (Etant donnés 1° la chute, 2° le gaz d’éclairage)*, 1946-66, although it is not at all clear *what is given* – because what is ‘there’ is determined in the end only by the viewer. This work, from the title to the conditions under which one views it, is thus, a puzzle that the viewer has to work out (it is viewed behind a large wooden door, through a ‘peep’ hole). See Eric Cameron (1991) ‘Given’ in Thierry De Duve (1991)(ed) *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, Cambridge, MA: 1-29.

<sup>11</sup> G.W. Leibniz (1989) *Philosophical Essays*, Indianapolis. Cf. A. N. Whitehead: “To be abstract is to transcend the particular occasion of actual happening. But to transcend an actual occasion does not mean being disconnected from it. On the contrary, I hold that each eternal object has its own proper connection with each such occasion which I term its mode of ingression into that occasion. Thus the metaphysical status of an eternal object is that of a possibility for an actuality.” Quoted in M. Thompson (1979) *Rubbish Theory: the Creation and Destruction of Value*, Oxford: 72.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Mark C. Taylor (1992) *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*, Chicago: chapter 6, discussion on the difference between the *logocentrism* and the *logo-centric*.



this discussion, no less), are only there as products of a succession of rendezvous that close the gap that the artist opens when plastic creation is assumed to end (with the production of the object), but which creation actually continues throughout the life of the object.<sup>13</sup>

The life history of these ‘unfinished’ objects is defined in a series of these coincidental meetings, which see the subject-as-viewer aiming, more or less, to consolidate, that is to bring what is present to the senses to a fixed point in perceptual understanding. The viewer thus recognises similarities or differences in the object when compared with other objects, forms associations between the object and fixed ideas or passing thoughts, and so on. The act of looking thus secures an identity between subject and art object.

Questions of what is being looked at are therefore caught up in establishing reliable signifiers, or of finding fixed relations, or properties, within and between things: objects presented within a frame, the perspectival arrangement of space, and ultimately the relation of the arrangement to reality. These are all reactions that arise on the basis of the viewer’s personal orientation to the world. The artist, by contrast, often stands apart from both the reliable and the significant, and is always wagering against a world thus made, declaring in each new creation that maybe things could really be *this other way* as well.<sup>14</sup> Still, no matter how self-critical, how innovative painters have tried to be, the defiance of the gesture that produced apparently meaningless objects that negate realism is itself appropriated and objectified by the subjective beholder, who ‘determines’ the nature of the gesture.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> I discuss the limits of plasticity in Duchamp’s work in the previous chapter. Another thing is that this art is thus rendered ‘real’ only by an extreme nominalism, an outright rejection of realism, which is to say meaning, or identity, is only given by an act of ‘naming’ that unites subject and object in terms that supply only a contingent identity. In other words, there is no identity between the two things, when taken apart from the naming conventions. Some prominent advocates of a nominalist rather than a realist understanding of the world are Richard Rorty (1989) *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge; Nelson Goodman (1978) *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis; and Nelson Goodman (1976) *Languages of Art: an Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Indianapolis.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Robert Rauschenberg’s statement that: “If I see any superficial subconscious relationship that I’m familiar with — clichés of association — I change the picture.” In W. Hopps and S. Davidson (1997) *Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, New York: 220.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. The British artist Cornelia Parker’s reaction to this appropriation: “I once heard a critic giving a gallery tour of my work, she was talking about it from a formal point of view, about my choice of making miniature monuments in lead and hanging them upside down being the opposite of the bronze sculpture on a pedestal. That’s not part of my thinking at all [...] the motivation for my work is not formal issues like that.” In Cornelia Parker (2000) *Cornelia Parker/ Institute of Contemporary Art Boston*, Boston.



*The Work of Art and the Gaze*

The doubt of the viewing subject is like a ghost that permanently inhabits meaning, yet meaning seeks to devise an arrangement of the objective world that conceals this absence of certainty: overcoming and assimilating the trace of the unwelcome visitor, always putting on a new coat of paint, moving the 'furniture' of the world around. Like the physical constructions, the museums and galleries, that in their own way edify the aesthetic realm, perceptual discrimination in meeting doubt affirms the self-conscious autonomy of the subject – consciousness is always consciousness of some *thing* to the subject; discrimination is unavoidable, and one's presence in front of a painting is itself a statement of autonomy.

To stand in front of the reconfigured world 'contained' within the frame that separates the canvas from its surroundings is a statement of openness, an allowance that the coincidental determines the outcome of this act. Given this, any relationship thus established between individuated subject and world – any identity serves to unify or reconcile two apparently discrete entities. Put another way, *to look* is not a passive act. Looking, in being directed by the critical faculties, identifies, and this, if not a direct connection that realises meaning (or something like meaning), is an act that strives to justify the looking, to at least give grounds for meaning, to make sense of why the gaze is turned to a specific place. Meaning is then the offspring of the autonomous reflection of a subjectivity engaged with a world of objects. So the viewer does not engage passively as if transported through the world by an external power.

The gaze is either fully intentional, or as Merleau-Ponty said, a response to some kind of 'summons'; perhaps to a swift movement on the periphery of the visual field that draws our attention, or to an object that is thrown into relief by its exceptional difference from the background of the world that now becomes the world around. This summons, according to Merleau-Ponty, ends with the eye "anchored in the object."<sup>16</sup> The eye is, therefore, always on permanent critical alert as one of the 'sensors' that are directed by the mind, and as Nelson Goodman wrote, the eye in particular is difficult to dissociate from the rational faculty in general. It is a part of it that "selects, rejects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyses, constructs."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*, London: 67. Cf. Norman Bryson (1983) *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, London, and Martin Jay (1993) *Downcast Eyes*, Berkeley.

<sup>17</sup> Nelson Goodman (1976) *ibid*: 9.



The critical apprehension of these apparently ‘unfinished’ art objects (that is, ‘critical’ in the philosophical sense of *looking*) – objects such as Joseph Cornell’s *Untitled* box (Plate 19, above) – arises at the subjective level because of the apparently disordered state they present; the objects demand to be understood on falling under the gaze, which is to say that one may come across any object accidentally, or be drawn to an object unwillingly, but no one *looks* at art objects by accident because they are normally held in places that are set apart from the everyday objects we encounter. In other words, the circumstances of art, its social ‘production’ and significance, which includes the loose rules that determine where art is held and viewed, of itself cannot but demand a discriminatory response on the part of the subject. And even if one accepts, as I argue, that it is the observer, in looking, that brings to some conclusion a disconnection in meaning, who retrieves the object from some non-place, the object can nevertheless have no other existence if the institutional and cultural context is stripped away; this is not in question.<sup>18</sup>

The art world constitutes almost a supergaze, in the form of an architectural vision of an all-seeing consciousness, whilst the artist, by contrast, always seeks an open conceptual space on which to build a world. The artist, then, pursues a continual renewal by breaching the bounds of an inwardly-directed meaning, by looking outwards to reinvent the world in an act that engages with the contingent; not only in terms of modernist self-criticism but actually in pushing such subjective demands several steps forward and across a liminal boundary into an uncertain place, which is necessarily at the expense of some previously known ‘existence,’ or life as it has been understood up until this point. The dramatic movement essential to such an act is a play with chance.

### *Creation and Void*

The performance of artistic creation begins within a conceptual void – with loose associations, fragmentary ideas, the speculation of the curious – it starts, in other words with nothing whole, fixed, or identifiable. And importantly, art, like play, is at this stage of creation for nothing but itself, and it is from this void that the artist emerges with

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<sup>18</sup> My concern is with how the subject reconciles the apparently disordered appearance of these ‘post-Duchampian’ creations. The question of the institutional and cultural context of object and viewer moves away from this concern, although this is a question that demands serious attention in a manner I cannot consider here. However, see, for example Pierre Bourdieu (1979) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge, MA.



something.<sup>19</sup> However, the void is not just some detached and empty otherness (say, the ‘non-artistic’ realm or the everyday), and against which the subject is determined, but rather more specifically, as Hegel said, the void in this sense is actually ‘an absolute otherness’ *in which consciousness permanently dwells*: it is the negating power of self, originating within the subject. The Hegelian void might then be manifested in self-conscious acts of forgetting, in the cognitive power that dissolves known relations that connected the subject to the world in some previous identification.<sup>20</sup> It is from this void that truth emerges as the self-negating aspect of subjectivity.<sup>21</sup> The artist, in vacating the ground of a previous identity, removes all categories in a transcendental reduction that temporarily excludes the world.<sup>22</sup> Between reason and unreason, order and disorder, and ultimately between identity as similarity and identity as differentiation, it is only finally an act of differentiation – a break with past – that ends the suspense, inaugurating the new.

The autonomous artist ultimately operates outside, or is always implicitly striving to move beyond the limit of the gaze, especially the supergaze of the art world, as this is what objectifies the space that to the artist must remain his entitlement. The creative act is thus much more an act of self-making than merely plastic creation, but this is something easily overlooked because all the viewer sees is the *product* of creation, which in purely empirical terms, in terms of what sense perceives, is the object that is of course external to the artist as subject, whilst creation is principally found in the activity of unseen consciousness.<sup>23</sup> The art object is ultimately only a sign of what cannot be seen, of the artist having experienced a psychological realignment between meaning and reality, although it becomes something else to the viewer.

The gaze as the interpreter of symbols relies on the resolution of complex objects that are present to the senses, and is eventually concerned with establishing some identity, by taking this sensory object and referring it back to some content of mind; it is

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<sup>19</sup> Phillipson, *Ibid*: 11.

<sup>20</sup> G.W.F. Hegel (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: 14.

<sup>21</sup> In terms of creativity the void does not become equivalent to a nihilistic tendency – the void is the source of edification, not destruction. What should be noted as different is that things that are destroyed are also made void; the point being that all things, all objects, begin from nothing and eventually return to nothing. Cf. Simon Critchley (1997) *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. London. The ultimate negation of self is death, and the subject – in differentiating itself from the world – makes the power of death real, as Dollimore notes: “death holds out the promise of a release from the very individuality whose formation would have been unthinkable without it.” J. Dollimore (1998) *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*. London: xx-xxi.

<sup>22</sup> See Edmund Husserl (1970) *Logical Investigations*, London.



an inwardly-directed and reductionist appropriation of what is perceived. The object, as Nelson Goodman has said, “does not sit as a docile model with its attributes neatly thrust out for us to admire and portray.”<sup>24</sup> Rather its signifying power is the result of our labelling and classificatory procedures, and nothing else.<sup>25</sup> The aesthetic gaze declares that the way we *take* from the world is thus the way we *make* it. Nevertheless, there is a paradox in this state of affairs; both parties in the artist-viewer relationship may act in a manner that frustrates the other, but they are really co-dependents, the parents of the object. The effect of the whole edifice of art is to frustrate the artist (by the establishment of more or less regulative institutions), and yet it prompts the defiant forward movement that disorders what is valued – this is the source of radical contingency. It is no surprise then the legitimacy of accepted ways of looking becomes the target of the artist, that art of the twentieth century itself becomes the denial through plasticity.

The point is also that our use of this term ‘modern’ itself only makes sense as a category breaker, when it is put up against what is already accepted, against tradition.<sup>26</sup> Modernism is an oppositional tendency that destroys the past, and it just so happens that with painting we have one strain of modernism that outpaces others because the tradition of representationalism has a more obvious relationship to questions of philosophical realism. This relation proves difficult to break – the canvas and the frame make what we know to be a ‘picture’ and a picture is supposed to resemble something else in the world. In objects like Joseph Cornell’s box constructions, the total effect is to negate resemblance. Instead the frame is appropriated and declared the space for an order that the artist produces unseen, and that is only fully realised coincidentally by some poetic enactment that involves both artist and viewer. Many of Cornell’s objects are constructed on a grid, which in modern society we are given to associate with order, but which within modern art, as Rosalind Krauss says, “is a way of abrogating the claim of natural objects to have an order peculiar to themselves.”<sup>27</sup> The viewer, in converging with the object, likewise disorders the world of objects as known.

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<sup>23</sup> On the indeterminacy of our language of action, and the ‘depth’ of the origin of acts in the ‘untranslatable’ location of the mental, see Donald Davidson (1980) *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford.

<sup>24</sup> See Goodman (1976) *ibid*: 32.

<sup>25</sup> On labeling and classification cf. Michel Foucault (1970) *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of Human Knowledge*, New York, and Stuart Hampshire (1959) *Thought and Action*, London.

<sup>26</sup> See Hans Blumenberg (1983) *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Cambridge, MA.

<sup>27</sup> Rosalind Krauss (1979) ‘Grids,’ in *October*, 9: 50-64.



## 10 The Visible Remainder

One of the questions I remember the answer to was,  
“What is your greatest fear?” and I said, “That I might run out of world.”

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

Resurrection seems to be a common theme in much of the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that follows Duchamp, whether this follows in the same spirit, or appears merely chronologically in the wake of Duchamp. The reanimation of dead matter occurs as the consequence of a world of increasing specificity, a world of *refinement*, in which we see a necessary residue in the matter which is ‘shaved’ from the surface of the objective world in the determinate act of making. Cast aside like the lacquer that would accrue formlessly as a byproduct of the marvellous technology that once etched a world of sound into the grooves of a piece of plastic, creating the aural document of some reality. We can only wonder what form this material now takes.

Ever since Duchamp, the *swarf* of life and the useless remains of objective value have been rescued by artists, brought back from the death sentence bestowed upon them by modern society – but only to half-life, to the characterless suspense of the Duchampian delay.

The residual materials in question are normally taken to be totally devoid of value; they represent only the matter that never disappears. It is matter that, on the contrary, *temporarily* vanishes as a condition of a process that seeks in its refinement, to define what belongs and what must be trashed. This is the destructive, negative end of making, a reminder that all things made are eventually reduced to the same; that in ‘death’ identity becomes absolute.

In 1997 the British artist Cornelia Parker, by happy coincidence, found herself in San Antonio, Texas, when she heard one day that a church had been struck by



lightning, and thence transformed by fire to a heap of charcoal. After recovering leftovers from the scene of this natural destruction, she then created a fragmentary 'cube' consisting of the now charred pieces of wood, which were suspended by wire to create the form. Large fragments in the middle of the 'cube' give way to the smallest of visible pieces around the edgeless parameter of the object, which dissolves, like the fragments of an explosion, into the surrounding atmosphere, in an echo of the accidental origin of this material. The piece is called *Mass (Colder Darker Matter)* in reference to, and perhaps in commemoration of, the sacred house of God that once was the place of the Mass, the place in which the committed would receive the Word (Plate 20). Now it was just cold dark matter, *mass* of an entirely different order; the *relic* of an object hanging together in a new form – this is the vulgar matter of life, now colder and darker because some natural intervention had profaned its once sacred function.<sup>1</sup>

Fragments of matter, and matter transformed – crushed, melted, stretched, or recovered – appear throughout the work of Cornelia Parker. In another installation, *Avoided Object (1995)*, buried objects were located by a metal detector, then resurrected from beneath the ground of Dusseldorf in Germany, to be suspended in the finished form above the ground at a height corresponding to the depth at which they had been fortuitously discovered. This literal and metaphorical raising of dead matter, in the particularity of the form we are presented with, takes a trend of the previous fifty or sixty years, and adds a degree of refinement that makes clear that where once the discarded objects of the modern world served the artist as the kind of device that would permit an escape from self-expression, now any object, whether destroyed by humanity or by nature, could serve the artist as a means of expressing something.

The history of 20<sup>th</sup> century art had seen painting so long removed from the centrality of the oil and canvas as the principle media that a generation of artists, such as Cornelia Parker, did not need to find ways of escaping painting as traditionally understood; rather they had already developed in the anti-painting tradition that was still, nevertheless, a development of painting. In this respect, the found objects of someone like Robert Rauschenberg, or the garbage containers of the French artist Arman, precede the more formal compositions of Cornelia Parker, but establish the

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<sup>1</sup> See Cornelia Parker (2000) *Cornelia Parker/Institute of Contemporary Art Boston*. London: Art Data. Parker also used the residue from the record mastering process to create a work called 'The Negatives of Sound.' The swarf was placed between two pieces of glass.



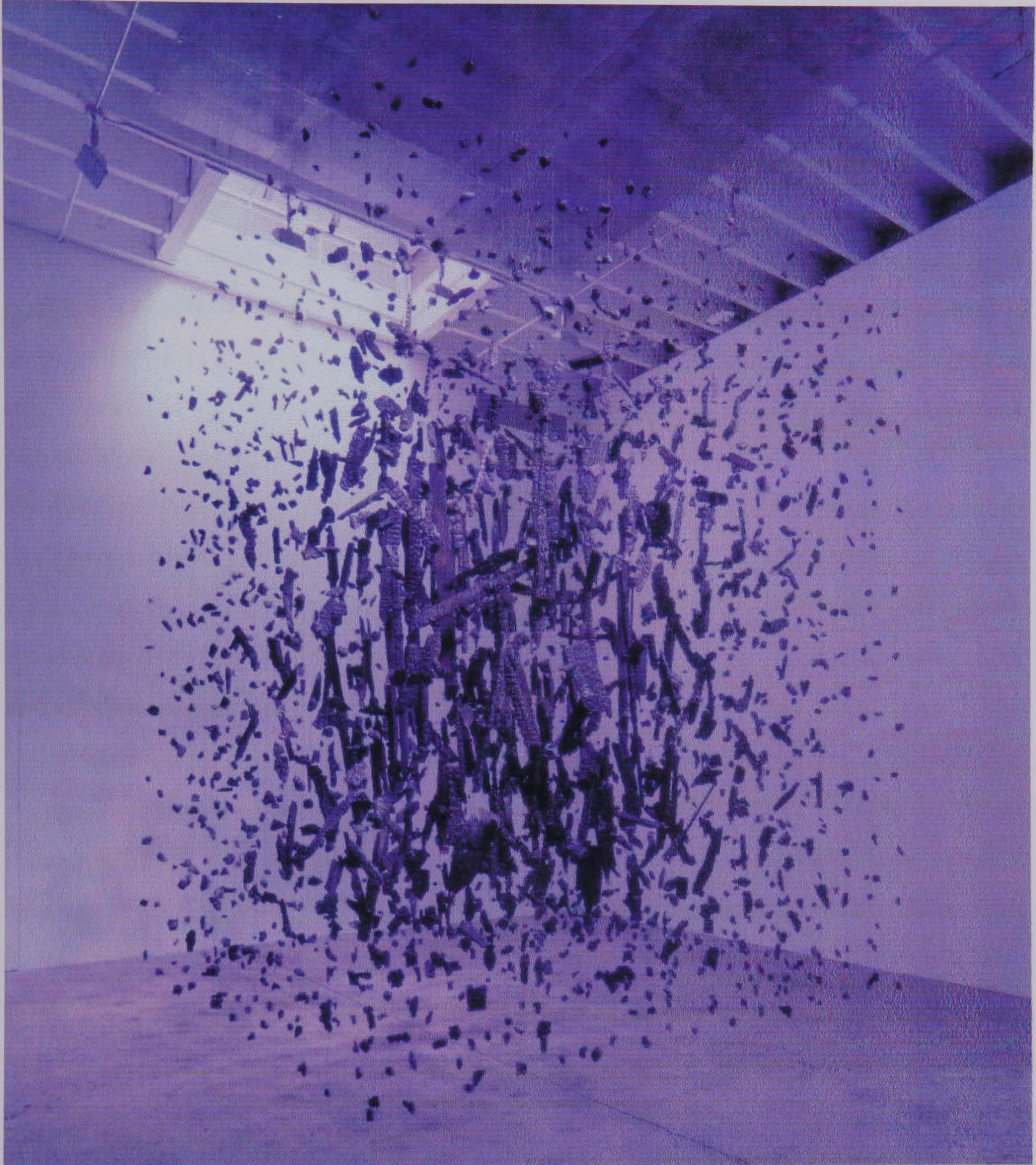


PLATE 20. *MASS (COLDER DARKER MATTER)*, Cornelia Parker, 1997. The transformation of remainders is a distinguishing feature of the work of Cornelia Parker. This 'cube' of fragments originated with accidental material (charred wood from a building struck by lightning), others — *Hanging Fire*, 1999 (suspected arson), and *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, 1991 (a controlled explosion) — the result of human agency (see Cornelia Parker/Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2000.) "I am concerned with ambivalence, with opposites, with inhaling and exhaling, with things falling apart and coming back together again," she has said. "With killing things off, as if they existed in cartoon comics and then resurrecting them, so that one set of references is negated as a new one takes its place." Quoted in Paul Crowther, 1997, *The Language of Twentieth Century Art*: p.209.



continuity between someone like Parker, or another of her predecessors, Tony Cragg, and Marcel Duchamp in the idea that the frame was now banished, that there were no limits to the objects that might provide material for the artist.

### *Metamorphosis of the Object*

To think of *objects* is usually to think of particular kinds of object, and this usually brings to mind something physical, material, and perhaps useful.<sup>2</sup> The object, in a material sense, is not only something that has a corporeality, a mass and form that is perhaps determined by its association with some function, it may be – like rock, dirt and other ‘dead’ or formless matter – a primary substance that is utilised in the creation of objects of use; as sand, for example, is used in the making of glass.

Nevertheless, the metamorphosis in question begins to take its current form with the objects cast-off by modern society. These were the objects that interested Robert Rauschenberg – the used up remnants of an urban civilization that was always discarding the old in the development of a more refined, more functionally responsive and efficient world.

What Rauschenberg saw was that once an object was deprived of the ‘character’ that is bestowed by functionality, then it becomes a more fluid item, difficult to fix in meaning, capable of occupying a number of different ‘roles.’ The novelty of what Rauschenberg was doing is caught in a photograph of the artist in a derelict New York lot taken by Fred McDarrah in 1961 when the artist was at the height of his early fame (Plate 21).<sup>3</sup> We see a dapper looking young man wearing polished shoes, and a smart, sensible overcoat. Rather incongruously given his surroundings, he is reading a newspaper as he sits in a scene of apparent destruction. Here we see the ‘objects’ of Rauschenberg’s art: rubble, dirt, pieces of wood, a broken sink, discarded oil cans, perhaps a broken gas lamp. The mismatch between his appearance and the appearance of the surroundings was reflected in the contextual reversal that he completed by taking these objects of destruction into the civilized spaces of modern society.

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<sup>2</sup> Objects are not only physical things identified, for example, by Lockean primary qualities, but include ideas, concepts, words, cultures, etc. Cf. Ian Hacking (1999) *The Social Construction of What?*

<sup>3</sup> This picture can be found J. Fineberg (1995) *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being*. London and New York, 176.





PLATE 21. ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG IN A DERELICT LOT, Fred W. Mc Darrah, 1961. Whilst many of his combines looked like random associations of garbage, Rauschenberg was nonetheless directed in his selection of objects by a heightened awareness of the possible meanings of items. For example: "We have certain ideas about bricks. A brick isn't just a physical mass of a certain dimension that one builds houses or chimneys with. The whole world of associations, all the information that we have — the fact that it is made of dirt, that its been through a kiln, romantic ideas about little brick cottages, deal with as many of the things you know about. Because if you don't, I think you start working more like an eccentric, or primitive." Quoted in W. Hopps and S. Davidson, 1997, *Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*. p. 29.



Rauschenberg shared the conviction of his friend and sometime collaborator John Cage, that “no value judgements are possible because nothing is better than anything else,” and he saw the taming of the artistic ego as a fundamental part of his desire to be an artist making art that reflected the world he lived in. Whilst conventional aesthetic refinement was therefore avoided, Rauschenberg was nevertheless aware that finally he would have to choose certain objects over others. In denying the hierarchical value of objects he merely wanted to, as he said, “throw enough obstacles in the way [...] of personal taste.”<sup>4</sup>

The fact that Rauschenberg made such an impact at this time is unusual given that Marcel Duchamp had been living in New York on and off for nearly 30 years. But this is made clearer when we discover that when Rauschenberg started out he had never seen any of Marcel Duchamp’s readymades – this was true certainly prior to his own notoriety. And the fact that he did not know Duchamp reflected also the fact that Duchamp’s reputation in the 1950’s had been eclipsed by the emergence of Abstract Expressionism as the dominant school of painting in the United States, and particularly in New York. Thus, many artists would have never seen Duchamp’s work before the 1960’s, except, perhaps, in photographic reproductions.<sup>5</sup>

The principal creative and aesthetic aims of the school of action painters that were associated with abstract expressionism was to permit the unconscious creative will to flow freely, somehow spontaneously, in order to realise a connection with some unstated, perhaps unknown, source.<sup>6</sup> For all that spontaneity was welcomed, however, abstract Expressionism did not entertain an idea that chance was a part of the process of creation, insofar as the painters placed great importance on the technical mechanics of painting, and on the attainment of immediacy being a condition of a rigorous preparation and mastery of the tools and technique of painting. There was a sense, therefore, in which some, like Jackson Pollock, believed their role was as a medium; a receptor for the kind of truth that is received as what we might call the *logos*.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin Tomkins (1965) *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 232.

<sup>5</sup> Despite his reputation now it is easy to forget how long it took for Duchamp to be accepted. For instance he never had a single solo exhibition until 1964 in Pasadena, California, and many of his works remained in private ownership.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Daniel Belgrad (1998) *The Culture of Spontaneity*. Chicago. For a defence of Abstract Expressionism, see T.J. Clark (1999) *Farewell to An Idea: Episodes From a History of Modernism*. New Haven and London. Chapter 7.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Mark C. Taylor (1992) *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture and Religion*.



artist here is in some sense really unaware of what is taking place in the 'act' of painting so total was the immersion.

Jackson Pollock had admitted as much when he suggested that his work was almost gifted to him, and that the painting therefore "has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess."<sup>8</sup> The urge to mine some foundational source in the self-expression of the action painters, Rauschenberg felt, interfered with the limitless possibilities of artistic creation because whilst the activity of painting seemed spontaneous, the labours that prepared one to attain this mediumistic condition involved an excess of thought and preparation.

This was not principally a limitation that was given by certain materials employed in Rauschenberg's view – he did work with the more traditional materials of paint and canvas himself, although this largely ceased to be the case from the early 1950's onwards. At those times when Rauschenberg did utilise the flat plane of the canvas, he would also incorporate found items into a kind of collage, which he called 'combine painting' because it was neither painting nor sculpture but had elements of both.<sup>9</sup> Again, like Duchamp, a painter schooled in traditional techniques, he was interested in escaping from what he had learned about what an artist should be, and this entailed also the abandonment of the notion that there were only certain materials it was legitimate for an artist to use.

From the randomness of buying unlabelled cans of paint, a way of removing the aesthetic consideration of colour, to throwing 'obstacles' in the way of self-expression – for example, in the use of found objects to create larger combines that broke the flat plane of the canvas and occupied three-dimensional space, Rauschenberg was also seeking the removal of the frame as a limiting and obstructive crutch. What he wanted to do was to open his window to the world, to find a way of putting the world into his work rather than his mind into it, and in this regard he differs significantly from Duchamp.

Rauschenberg had gotten very close to the objects that would soon come to dominate his work, the discarded matter of the urban environment, whilst working for a

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<sup>8</sup> Belgrad, *ibid.*, 23

<sup>9</sup> This modification of collage techniques was the continuation of a trend that is associated with modern painting of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but which seems to have origins prior to modernism. As Eddie Wolfram notes: "In the curio cabinets of wealthy collectors of the seventeenth century strange objects made from the most bizarre materials might be found: Mosaic pictures constructed from beetles, corn kernels, coffee beans and fruit stones." See E. Wolfram (1975) *A History of Collage*, London. 8.



construction company in the early 1950's, and it did not take long for this acquaintance to bear fruit.<sup>10</sup> As Calvin Tomkins explains, by 1953 Rauschenberg's first moves away from canvas saw him fascinated by the richness of the material garbage that was lying around New York City, and he was using materials such as:

[R]ocks dug up on his block by Consolidated Edison workmen, pieces of lumber, scrap metal. In his bottomless curiosity to see 'what is a picture and what isn't', he even tried making pictures out of dirt, which he packed into boxlike frames.<sup>11</sup>

Like Joseph Cornell, another unusual artist, Rauschenberg collected a vast storehouse of the random and banal, although in contrast to Cornell who was a meticulous sorter and chronicler, Rauschenberg had amassed these items through, as Walter Hopps says, "an ecumenical passion for collecting," which became his means of reordering experience.<sup>12</sup> Rauschenberg allowed for the intrusion of accidents in other ways as well, particularly as part of a silk screening process that involved a potential for disordering any intentions he might have had in that the medium itself entailed relinquishing a degree of control in the technical preparation of the screens, and in the way the effects of this method could be difficult to foresee.<sup>13</sup>

But it was in the combines of the late 1950's that Rauschenberg more fully developed a way to frustrate the development of personal stylistic foundations – these pieces were formally ambiguous in the realisation of some kind of mutant combination of painting and sculpture. He took and used many items and materials in the making of these: wood, glass, tin cans, stuffed chickens, a stuffed goat, broken furniture, splattered paint, pieces of concrete, buckets of cement, iron spikes, wire – the list could be endless because there was nothing he would not use.

Between 1955 and 1959, Rauschenberg resurrected such discarded objects and incorporated them into more than sixty combines, of which the most well-known are

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<sup>10</sup> See Mary Lynn Kotz (1962) *Rauschenberg: Art and Life*, 78-79.

<sup>11</sup> Tomkins, 1965, *ibid.*, 209

<sup>12</sup> See Walter Hopps, 'Rauschenberg's Art of Fusion' in Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson (1998) *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, 22. On Joseph Cornell, see Lindsay Blair (1998) *Joseph Cornell's Vision of Spiritual Order*. London.

<sup>13</sup> See Tomkins, 1965, 233. Rauschenberg said: "When I get the silk screens back from the manufacturer the images on them look different from the way they did in the original photographs, because of the change in scale, so that's one surprise right there. Then, they look different again when I transfer them to canvas, so there's another surprise. And they keep on suggesting different things when they're juxtaposed with other images on the canvas, so there's the same kind of interaction that goes on in the combines and the same possibilities of collaboration and discovery."



*Bed* (1955), a bedspread and pillows splattered with paint, which has been nailed to a rectangular surface and then hung, just like a traditionally framed canvas; *Monogram* (1955-59), which may be Rauschenberg's most famous combine, a stuffed goat purchased from a junk shop, smeared with paint and dirt and finished off with a car tyre placed around the body of the goat, which was then positioned atop a collage; and *Odalisk* (1958), which features a white rooster on top of a wooden box-like structure covered with childlike paint strokes and images of women torn from books and magazines. Other combines also included found objects, from the streets of New York mainly (but anywhere would do); boards, bricks, chairs, ladders, bottles, and so on (Plate 22).<sup>14</sup>

For Robert Rauschenberg junk became an easier material to use because these 'dead' objects of *refuse* had no meaning apart from the negative undifferentiated one that declared their lack of worth, the total absence of distinction, and making use of such garbage avoided the difficult question of defining an identity through stylistic conventions or through representationalism. He had found that the position of modern painting, summed up by the fact that the art had itself become about form and material – about the paint and the canvas, and what could be achieved within the flat surface. This was excessively self-conscious and directed, he believed. He recalled that Josef Albers, one of his teachers, tried to convince him that one color was no better than another, but the liberation was still incomplete – the question of colour still remained a potentially disabling one because it implied the need for a choice; he “couldn't decide to use one color instead of another, because I really wasn't interested in taste.”<sup>15</sup>

Rauschenberg took what Duchamp did with the useful everyday object of rational society in the readymades and made a comparable transformation with useless objects – that is to say he removed them from a familiar context. It is a curious historical fact that

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<sup>14</sup> *Bed* came about because of Rauschenberg's inability to afford expensive canvases. Other combines were created, and discarded on a whim. According to Kotz, 1990, pp.78-79, “He made strange boxes, somewhat like those that Joseph Cornell was showing at the Egan Gallery, but much more primitive and fetishistic, filled with stones, nails, feathers, bits and pieces of glass...He took the boxes to the Galleria dell'Obleisco [in Italy], the only Roman gallery to show contemporary abstract art. Thinking them outrageously funny, the owner exhibited the objects as the latest 'modern art.' To Rauschenberg's amazement and the gallery owner's amusement some were sold. They called them 'Scatole:contemplative e feticci personlai' (Thought Pieces and Personal Fetishes). In Florence, the Galleria d'Arte Contemporanea showed the work. A local critic wrote that the art was a 'psychological mess' and should be thrown into the Arno. Rauschenberg, who was about to leave for home obliged. 'It solved the packing problem,' he observed later.”

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Calvin Tomkins (1965) *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 200.





PLATE 22. COCA COLA PLAN, Robert Rauschenberg, 1954. This box construction is reminiscent of Joseph Cornell's collections of ephemera. Rauschenberg was aware of the ostensible similarity, but was keen to insist on a distinction: "A big difference in our attitudes is that I dragged ordinary materials into the art world for a direct confrontation, and I felt Cornell incorporated highly select materials to celebrate their rarification [*sic*]. I love his work but I think that we live in different worlds." Quoted in Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, 1997, *Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*: p. 29.



the respective origins of the objects – as junk, and as objects of value – in both cases follows through an initial transformation into ‘art’ in slightly different ways. Thus, the readymades are objects that, through passage of time, begin the more one observes them to look sleek and unusually elegant. Rauschenberg’s combines, by contrast, unfix our relationship to the object world in a subtly different manner; the gesture looks the same as Duchamp’s, but by taking and re-contextualising once useless remains, rather than utilitarian objects, we are still allowed to see the resemblance to junk. In fact, there is no doubt as to this relation – garbage is unmistakably recognisable as forever *foreign*; these objects, in the alien forms of the uselessness of the parts constitute the entirety of their uniqueness.<sup>16</sup>

### *A Detour of Object Functionality*

In a previous chapter I looked at the destruction of identity in the work of Marcel Duchamp, particularly as a result of his use of disguise to frustrate the reasonable expectations that a work of art represents something understandable, or meaningful, but identity is put into question in another sense also in Duchamp’s work, and one that is important to our understanding of the profane nature of the materials artists like Robert Rauschenberg used.

If the utility of objects signified the extent to which industrial society had attempted to make the material world more responsive to *need*, to make the stuff of the world more functional or efficient, Duchamp theoretically inverted the relation.

With the readymade, any evaluative – and thus aesthetic – context was denied not only because the objects were ‘non-aesthetic,’ but also because the object was often removed from any intrinsically given reference points, which is to say from the associations of time and place that give objects a functional definition, from any cultural or social context, which would make the object *recognisable*. This finally leaves us without any indication of what this context might be. The onus was on the viewer to figure out the significance of these objects, and this was a puzzle that could only be

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<sup>16</sup> The idea of appropriation that was one of the principal feature of Duchamp’s readymades was also continued in a slightly different, less material, vein by artists such as those belonging to the Fluxus groups, who were less concerned with the appropriation of objects. On this point see Daniel Spoerri (ed.) (1962) *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*. London: Atlas Press. Other post-Duchamp trends in 20<sup>th</sup> century art are examined in, for example, Lucy R. Lippard (1997) *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972*; and Yve-Alain Bois, and Rosalind Krauss (1997) *Formless: A User’s Guide*. New York: Zone



resolved within the context of questions of meaning; questions, as we saw, that can only be answered in analytical or tautological terms.<sup>17</sup>

The transformations of the object we see in the readymade were a prime example of this. Mimetic forms of expression – landscapes, the still life, portraits – for instance, might have been said to apply a rather Lockean empirical spin on existence. The portrait represented the internalisation and re-presentation of a supposedly objective external reality. Yet portrait painting may be at the extreme end of the limitations imposed by representationalism, leaving out much of the reality that was apparent beyond the frame of the canvas, and evident through other means.<sup>18</sup> It might be argued that in conventional representational terms, some painting which passed as art was valued to the extent that it preserved a likeness to some objectively given phenomena, scenario, or person, with portraiture being the most obvious example of such a value.

On reflection, however, the portrait is more akin to the camera-taken family snapshot we know today, than it is to the modernist artistic impulse, as we now understand that. It is an act of identification that declares the objective and social value placed on *more of the same*.<sup>19</sup>

But if this kind of representation did not speak of the fragmentary nature of modern life, art moved in the twentieth century towards the dissolution of the object, when taken as an ideal or represented form. And so, the days of art being accepted and understood principally as some kind of adornment, or as an entertaining diversion for the viewer were now over. In general, modern art in the twentieth century dispensed with resemblances for a variety of historical and intellectual reasons, but Marcel Duchamp in particular wanted to explore the seeming impossibility of identification when ‘objective reality’ was perceived to deny the singularity of the individual experience; to get rid forever of “the possibility of recognising or identifying any two

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<sup>17</sup> I discuss the ‘analyticity’ of the aesthetic in the previous chapter. On works of art as ‘analytical propositions’ see chapter 8 of Paul Crowther (1997) *The Language of Twentieth Century Art: A Conceptual History*. New Haven: Yale.

<sup>18</sup> See Hillel Schwartz (1996), *The Culture of the Copy*, 92. He quotes Erasmus on this matter: “What an enormous amount of a real person is missing from the portrait! ... Where are the brain, the flesh, the veins, the sinews and the bone, the bowels, blood, breath, humours? Where are life, movement, feeling, voice and speech? Where finally are man’s special characteristics, mind, intelligence, memory and understanding?”

<sup>19</sup> Schwartz, *Ibid*, 92: “Ruth Henshaw Brown, who painted one hundred portraits a year and drew over a thousand profiles of New Englanders from 1828 to 1846, was directed to add new glasses to the face of Rev. Timothy Rogers, whose portrait she had done less than a year before. During a period of six years she was called upon several times to update the hair and dress of her painting of Lydia Burr. A losing battle, this finicky correctness, but it was strenuously fought, to the profit of artists who did fifty silhouettes or a dozen portraits a day.”



things as being like each other.”<sup>20</sup> Where the contents of the world, in other words, could not be ordered according to the concepts of reason, nor of reasonable values or expectations.

The repetitive production of artefacts could be seen to stand in contrast to the fast-changing nature of life in modern society, a world in which resemblances could now no longer be relied upon to reveal objective truth – and this extends to the most basic manifestations of ‘taste,’ which is to say it no longer takes very long for us to become convinced that we require something new – mainly because things become old very fast within the context of ceaseless production. And so, the popular craving for simulation is like a desire for recently outmoded, yet ‘ancient’ products – it denies the value of innovation. The entire problem for the creative instinct is to escape this cosiness, as Picasso, for example observed: “No, painting is not for decorating apartments,” he said. “It is an instrument of war for attack and defence against the enemy.”<sup>21</sup>

The enemy was the complacent acceptance of what was easily digested, pretty or decorative; in other words, it was acquiescence in the easy and uncomplicated objectification given by popular acceptance. Perhaps the excesses of life – resulting from the mass production of goods – were making civilisation lazy and flabby. Adornments spoke of decadence. Confection had replaced substance. The absence of novelty is now made equivalent to a hell on earth, or as Hillel Schwartz said, “a waiting room with kitsch reproductions and no exits. A prison cell with loops of Muzak. A closed ward.”<sup>22</sup>

Hell, or not, the experience of modern life nevertheless engenders a sense of being that produces the expectation of a reality that can be relied upon; we expect to find the same content in experience over and over. Why else would we willingly enter the hurtling piece of metal and machinery that is an airplane if we did not accept that, usually, it hurtles toward its destination quite safely?

The point is that the experience of *sameness*, along with technological progress has made it possible to rely upon consistency. Everyday objects we use can now be found the world over exactly the same. This ‘shrinking’ of the world, in terms of possible

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Octavio Paz (1970) *Marcel Duchamp, Or the Castle of Purity*. London: 10. This essay was reprinted as chapter one of Octavio Paz (1990) *Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare*. New York. The quotation can be found on page 16. See also Harriet Ann Watts (1980) *Chance: A Perspective on Dada*. Ann Arbor: 33.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Tomkins, 1988, *Post-to-Neo: The Art World of the 1980's*. New York: 52

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Schwartz, *ibid*: 317.



experiences, has thus made surprises more exceptional. Yet, at the same time, in a subtle way, experience produces the grounds for the awareness of surprise.

Novelty items – again, like most consumer objects, universal, found in gift shops the world over – are just so because they are deceptive, or playful in appearance. And so we can see, “saltshakers in the shape of lightbulbs, skillets converted into picture frames or clocks, ice tongs made to serve as paper towel holders.” But ‘kitsch’ is also junk – the word in its German origin was initially employed to designate degraded value.<sup>23</sup> The list of kitsch items could thus be endless, and it reveals the attractiveness of even the slightest, subtlest surprise.

When we take the everyday implements of modern living within their proper context they realise both a rational desire for order and control over life, and a functional ‘transparency’ – the appearance gives no lie. There is a limitless supply of these objects and, not surprisingly, our ordinary language use settles their utilitarian basis, thus identifying the expectations that come from the names; ladders, refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, cutlery, shovels, hat racks, and so on, have a definite, not to say, objectively useful, purpose in helping us to organise our movements meaningfully, and in aiding our progress through the obstacles we face daily.

Functional objects will also normally be timesaving devices; for example, shovels and refrigerators, in an important sense rationalise work to allow time for leisure. Yet, we forget the technological genius that has gone into the creation of even the simplest of these everyday objects. A shovel, for instance, is a marvel of rational creation. What could be simpler than an implement for gathering up and removing the various obstacles we find – snow, dirt, or gravel? Think of the time saving capabilities – of the genius of ergonomic design. These objects represent progress.

The objects of modern society stand in a relation of identity to their function, can be understood usually by the explanatory method par excellence of modern society, analysis, which is to say that by breaking down their meaning in terms of this functionality:

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<sup>23</sup> George Basalla (1982), ‘Transformed Utilitarian Objects,’ 189. On kitsch, see also Celeste Olalquiaga (1999) *The Artificial Kingdom*. London: 38-39, fn.8, who explains the etymology of ‘kitsch’ includes “*verkitschen*, to make cheap, and *kitschen*, to collect junk from the street.”



Chilling food = refrigeration

Removing creases = ironing

Lifting dirt from a carpet = vacuuming

A clue to the significance of such functional objects to modern living is given in the ease with which they soon come to be taken for granted. This *forgetting*, too, is a function of our individual and collective orientation toward the world. The questions that occupy the thoughts of a child, for example, are banished by experience, or as David Hume said by the recognition of the constant conjunction of contiguous phenomena, which then, eventually, becomes an unconscious acceptance of the 'transparency' of appearances. And so our faith in the very reliability of objects and functional performance tames the inquisitive mind, which, in childlike fashion sees curiosity in everything.

Duchamp was aware that in removing everyday functional objects from their intended use, he was, in the first place, mocking the rationalisation of modern life, including, as we saw, the ordering tendencies of the aesthetic.<sup>24</sup> During his life most of these transformed objects were never shown in galleries or museums, and were known for a time only to Duchamp's friends. Many of the original Readymades, for example, were also lost, and most of them – at one time or another – were only to be found, after his rediscovery by the so-called Neo-Dadaists, in his New York apartment.

This apartment itself was a testament to idleness, to the unworthiness of work, from the first obvious sign to the visitor – given by the sight of a rope seen on entering through the front door. This extended to a chair where Duchamp would sit and play chess, saving him from rising to greet his visitors.

Post-war America, by contrast, was renowned for its creation of a multitude of objects to keep the modern home a clean and efficient living space.<sup>25</sup> Duchamp's contempt for such a reasonable ordering of one's life was evident in the absence of shiny, white and chrome surfaces, not to mention in the confusing 'organisation' of objects.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "When I discovered the Readymades I thought to discourage aesthetics. In Neo-Dada they have taken my readymades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottle-rack and urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty." Marcel Duchamp quoted in DeDuve, 1991, *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, 164. The same article raises questions over the attribution of this statement to Duchamp, although it seems to fall within the context of everything else he said and wrote.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Ellen Lupton (1992) *The Bathroom, the Kitchen, and the Aesthetics of Waste: a Process of Elimination*. New York.

<sup>26</sup> One interesting outcome of this lack of housework was Man Ray's well known picture *Dust Breeding*, taken in Duchamp's apartment, and featuring a section from Duchamp's *Large Glass*, which the photograph shows to have



This disordered space represented something of an obstacle course to anyone but Duchamp, for whom it attained some curious order; it was the exact opposite of what a modern home should exemplify – comfort and ease of use – instead it was a disorientating funhouse full of randomly distributed objects that, to the uninformed eye, were simply junk. Here, the readymades were not installed for the aesthetic pleasure of guests, but were, rather, randomly distributed throughout the apartment without much sensible purpose, as Helen Molesworth notes in the following description of an photograph of this scene:

A coatrack nailed to the floor in front of a bicycle wheel atop a kitchen stool. There is a photograph in the background of which we spy the urinal suspended from a doorjamb; in the foreground a shovel dangles from the ceiling.<sup>27</sup>

One can imagine that Duchamp's frequent visitors would have to be extremely careful to avoid accidents, because little in this apartment met conventional expectations. If it was not clear what Duchamp was doing with the readymades at the time of their 'production' his apartment may have provided some insight in the evidence of an unusual conception of 'furniture,' not to say an odd way of ordering his living space.

The transformation of everyday functional objects, to the extent that they cease to be functional any longer, subverts the reasonable expectations of the unquestioning mind; it negates Humean constant conjunction as the basis of knowledge, which we remember Hume himself saw as merely our perception of the patterns objects or relations fall into, rather than what constitutes a pattern. The readymade *gesture* thus casts doubt upon an unreflective assumption that the meaning of objects is only to be found in their everyday, or intended, use.

### *The Physical Poverty of the Object*

This transformation was one means of giving a new life to objects, of reconfiguring the context of meaning, a renewed context that then mediates the perception of the object as art. The element of the contingent found in the signifying power of these gestures lies in the implication that meaning is constituted by a continual *recycling of matter*, in the

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been colonized by dirt. The resulting object, as pictured, can only be described as artistic by accident, though ignorance of its origin would conceal this. The image is reproduced in many places, but see Dawn Ades *et al* (1999) *Duchamp*. London: 91.



resurrection and re-ordering of the material objects that furnish the physical 'being-ness' of existence.

This was rooted in a belief that time and change could be incorporated as a feature in the execution of a radically redefined plasticity that would then 'extend' from the object to the observer in recognition that there was no longer a privileged objective perspective which could determine a final set of properties for the object; it was, as Martin Jay has said, a denial of the "transcendental atemporal viewing subject."<sup>28</sup> But the capacity for transformation also suggested that ideas of existence and non-existence provided the language for the art of the transformed object, when language was understood as the artificial system of signs and symbols that allowed intelligible communication.

The fragmentary nature of experience in modern society is thus reflected in the incorporation of discrete and randomly associated objects in the works of assemblage and installation artists. There is a literal filling up of empty space, a void, with reconstituted remains of once distinct objects, and the question for the artist moves, in the mid-to-late twentieth century, from one of how to utilise the flat surface of the canvas – a surface that is bound in three dimensional space by a frame that literally *masks off* the contents and sets the object apart from its environment – to one of how the language of art can be articulated within the language of everyday use; a question that has always been implicit in modernism, and that was found in the making of a reality that is itself not 'real' in anything but terms that demand the suspension of rational expectations.

Where artists like Robert Rauschenberg, Joseph Cornell, and Arman had pushed such a possible discourse to the fore by bringing found items within a more or less conventional frame – within boxes, projecting from the canvas, and so on – and thus into the actual space where art is still recognisable enough to be presented to the world, that is into a space that by definition objectified and also legitimised it, it took an extreme development of the idea to really bring home the fundamentally alien aspect of

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<sup>27</sup> See Helen Molesworth, 1996, 'Work Avoidance: The everyday Life of Marcel Duchamp's Readymades,' in *Art Journal*, 50(1): 51. The photograph is found alongside this article.

<sup>28</sup> See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 152.



these objects. It was the French artist Arman who took this to its logical end by actually filling up a gallery with garbage he found in the street (Plate 23).<sup>29</sup>

The force of garbage as an intrusive element in art thus exhausted by the totality of Arman's garbage invasion, artists began to employ discarded objects, and fragments of objects in a new way to realise a *form* rather than to simply illustrate the degraded value in the object, the actual poverty of the objects.

We can see something of this development in *765 Paper Balls*, an installation from 1969 by British artist John Hilliard, who can be taken to precede Cornelia Parker in the implicit suggestion that the matter of the world is eventually resolved into smaller elements, into garbage, which we see is just the same basic material in an unformed state, devoid of conventional objective properties. And garbage here just signifies the absence of language to describe what is present to sense, a way of giving a name to the nameless.

Hilliard's material takes the temporary form of small scrunched-up ball-like shapes that dangle with an eloquent lack of cohesion within the space of an empty room (Plate 24). Before he resurrected this material, it had, in a previous life, another form when it was constituted from pulp into a newspaper; a peculiarly poetic choice of material given that the newspaper delivers the facts of daily life before these too become overtaken by yet *newer* news. The newspaper, in a sense, signifies the ultimate recyclable material in its reference to the constant flux of events which can only be glimpsed momentarily as the new, events that are thus only worthy of a fleeting existence in reconstituted pulp. It all ends as rubbish, in other words.

And the point is that these material fragments, like used-up and discarded objects, are no longer identifiable with any useful purpose, but it is nevertheless the case that they do not disappear from this earth – they disappear only from collective memory. In truth 'dead' matter is always taking another form, being 'reborn' as something else.

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<sup>29</sup> This particular exhibition entitled *Full-Up*, was in response to a previous exhibition by Yves Klein, *Le Vide (The Void)*, in which the Iris Clert gallery in Paris had been cleansed of all objects, of all art, and then painted white. Some time later Arman filled up this void with garbage. Another notable aspect of this was found in the public announcement of the exhibition, with 30,000 invitations sent out that were in the form of a sardine can filled with garbage, and inside which there was also a formal statement of intent: "Iris Clert asks you to come contemplate in 'the full' the total force of the real condensed into a critical mass." See Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, chapter 11.





PLATE 23. LARGE BOURGEOIS REFUSE. Arman, 1960. In the same year as Arman produced this memorial to the banished remains of modern living he took the principle of accumulating such 'things' within glass boxes to the extreme. The exhibition *Le Plein* ("Full-up") took the empty space of the Galerie Iris Clert in Paris, which had been left after empty as the result of the just finished Yves Klein exhibition *Le Vide* ("The Void"). As Bruce Altshuler notes, the space was filled with any garbage Arman could get his hands on. For example: "6 oyster shells, 3 cubic yards of used bulbs, ...200 pounds of old records, 48 walking canes, 7 coffee mills, ...5 bidets, 6 slices of bread, 3 flower pots, 180 bird cages, ...10 old hats, 12 pairs of shoes, 1 ice bucket, ...70 pounds of curtains, 5 hula hoops, 1 ashtray with ashes, ...1 cubic yard of metal shavings." In the end of course such distinctions are meaningless, as the items become simply garbage. See Bruce Altshuler, 1994, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, Berkeley: Ch.11





PLATE 24. 765 PAPER BALLS, John Hilliard 1969. Pieces of newspaper, and other torn scraps hang from the ceiling of an otherwise empty room. In terms of the work itself, taken as an object it exists only in the photograph that shows a partial view of the room that holds it. As well as being constituted of garbage the piece is therefore also transitory; matter takes a temporary form, like the material here utilised did when it was constituted, for example, as a newspaper. Eventually it ends in garbage. The photograph is from the catalog of an exhibition at Kettle's Yard Gallery, Cambridge, 1984, *1965 to 1972 — When Attitudes Became Form*.



In the garbage sculpture of Tony Cragg, for example, we are asked to consider that he is really doing little more than what painting and sculpture has always done, which is to fashion some form from naturally occurring materials. The difference with the materials Cragg uses when compared with traditional sculpture is that when taken as individual pieces the materials can be seen as parts of something else, yet composed as a whole they seem to have a shape and form that is assimilated within the finished form.

And so what we see depends on how we observe the object, on what we look for, or expect to see. Thus we may describe what we see in ways that diverge from the viewing experience of others. As objects of utility the pieces of Cragg's various works would have been recognisable to us all as the implements of modern living – pieces of machinery, kitchen utensils, toys – yet as pieces of rubbish that he has collected they had been declared dead, worthless, and in a sense rendered formless because at the level of the perception of everyday use, the form itself, whatever it was, no longer fitted the function. Is this not always the case however? Only if a functional object carries out its function does it 'work.'

In some of his works these broken shards are more difficult to identify than in others. For example in *African Culture Myth* (1984) we see the silhouette of an African male – the form and line of the head is exquisitely but improbably realised by the positioning of jagged pieces of what we can see are broken pieces of plastic, metal or clay; a plate, part of what is perhaps a tennis racket that looks as if it has had a few bites taken out of it, and so on (Plate 25). Elsewhere in the figure you might make out a mudflap (that usually covers the wheel of vehicle), a tube, some rubber or plastic washers – but this all fades to be replaced in perception by the figure which merges in a completeness that seems impossible, a conceit that is only possible with the assistance of the viewer.

Like art that has employed found objects before, Cragg allows the question of the identity of objects to linger before the gaze. The fragmented figure perplexes because of its power as the fragment of a value that has been ripped of its properties; and the paradox is in the fact that we only realise an identity with objects in our consumption of them, which of course is exactly what produces the shabby remains we throw away. "We consume, populating our environment with more and more objects," Cragg has said. "With no chance of understanding the making processes because we specialize; specialize







in the production, but not in the consumption.”<sup>30</sup> And the failure to understand the making process is a kind of alienation from the life and death of matter, matter that is made object by the animating force of ideas and language and this, in turn, determining the production of functional objects.

The forms that Cragg presents are ways of appropriating the object world and giving it some new form that is wholly animated through the necessity of describing it in terms of ideas and language already known, that we recognise in terms of its physical properties, for instance, in terms of shape and dimension – a large *cube* composed of broken pieces of rock, wood, carpet, books, newspapers – *Stack*, 1983 (Plate 26); a constellation of decapitated *steeple*s made from what looks like old car parts – *Minster*, 1987 (Plate 27), and so on. What does this say? Language says ‘cube’ and ‘steeple’ but the objects signify the poverty of the language of forms – of what Locke called ‘primary qualities’ of figure, dimension, and mass. And language may seem to fail us here because of the lack of purity or transparency in these *particular instances* of the forms described; that is to say in the terms of the degraded nature of the material itself – but to look at it this way would be mistaken.

The poverty is in our language because what are ‘cubes’? What are ‘steeples’? They are nothing but names that have no content without particular referents.

The visible remainders that here comprise the body of the objects direct us also to the continual renewal of objects, and to the indeterminate meaning of Cragg’s curious sculptures themselves, which speculate on a resolution within the mind of the beholder, and this is a kind of wager that is only resolved by overcoming the Duchampian *delay* of suggestion. “I’m simply proposing things,” he has said:

I can be fascinated by a material or a new type of image in the same naïve way a child can be. It is better not to know anything than to make the stupid pretence of knowing everything.<sup>31</sup>

And taking this ‘lack of knowing’ into the creative process allows for the subversion of the world of objects as currently understood. That is to say the world as *named*. Tony Cragg summed up the universe of possibility that then becomes available in terms of a

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<sup>30</sup> See Tony Cragg /Societe des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts (1985) *Tony Cragg*. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Cragg, *Ibid.* 31.





PLATE 26. STACK. Tony Cragg, 1983. This cube form is significantly more imposing than the evidence of this image may suggest: 2mx2m2m. The artist, Tony Cragg, had created similar large objects made from equally worthless material before this particular example. Norbert Lynton notes that a dominant theme in the work of Cragg is of "knowledge as the product of chance plus ordering." See his introduction to *Tony Cragg/ Fifth Triennale, India 1982* (The British Council, 1982). Cragg takes a form that is at once recognizable as a Lockean *primary quality* and yet by explicitly revealing the constitutive elements that make the form allows the mind of the viewer to consider that what we see on the surface of life perhaps only corresponds to a name that identifies only this primary quality; the point being that the object is obviously more than this.



*modus operandi* that leaves the field of meaning boundless, the potential sources of inspiration limitless:

Simple processes – with materials no one else wants – ideas that interest me – images I like – made where people let me make them – rooms, walls, floors; the physical frame – emotional responses, intellectual responses – elegant works, ugly works, humorous works, beautiful works, decorative works – works in which I learnt from the materials – works like pictures – meanings I intended – meanings which surprise me – personal references, political references, cultural references, no references – as straightforward as I can make it.<sup>32</sup>

In *Four Plates* from 1976, for example, we see four dinner plates placed in a line beginning with one plate in the manufactured form, which is then succeeded as the image progressively expands to the fore by more fragmented plates, or rather the smashed pieces because they have ceased to be plates, until we reach the point where if the final plate were not identified by its physical relation to the complete plate within the frame of the picture, we would have no idea what it was.<sup>33</sup>

Cragg here highlights the character of identity in conventional perception as one principally of resemblance, of the constant conjunction of contiguous phenomena – we only know what a plate is by comparing it to an item of visual memory – and also, once again, directs us to another perspective on the matter, which is to say on *matter* itself as the resolution of a whole into ‘atoms’ that appears to point to the atomic flux that persists beyond the mask of the empirical *givenness* of objects. And this is also the significant area he shares with the objects and installations of the chronologically later Cornelia Parker, in whose work ‘dead’ matter is resurrected into beguiling new forms.

The transformation of matter in Parker’s work is not restricted to giving new life to unwanted objects, but is also found, for example, in taking and re-contextualising fragments, presenting partial perspectives, or bending and stretching ‘matter’ until it is unrecognisable under the terms of a previous identity. “As a child,” she explains, “I used to crush coins on a railway track. You couldn’t spend your pocket money afterwards but you kept the metal slivers for their own sake, as an imaginary currency and as physical

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<sup>32</sup> In *Tony Cragg: Fifth Triennale India, 15<sup>th</sup> March -7<sup>th</sup> April, 1982*. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Pictured in Cragg, *ibid*: 4.





PLATE 27. MINSTER. Tony Cragg, 1987. These discarded car parts stand as monuments to a contemporary consumer culture that thrives on obsolescence. Whilst the presentation of utilitarian objects in new combinations and out of context is as old as the readymade, it is the selection of spent objects, and specifically the *intrusion* of garbage into an aesthetic 'sphere' that suggests the inversion of usefulness is here secondary to the idea that what is noteworthy about the objects is what it says about the indestructibility of the debris produced in modern society.



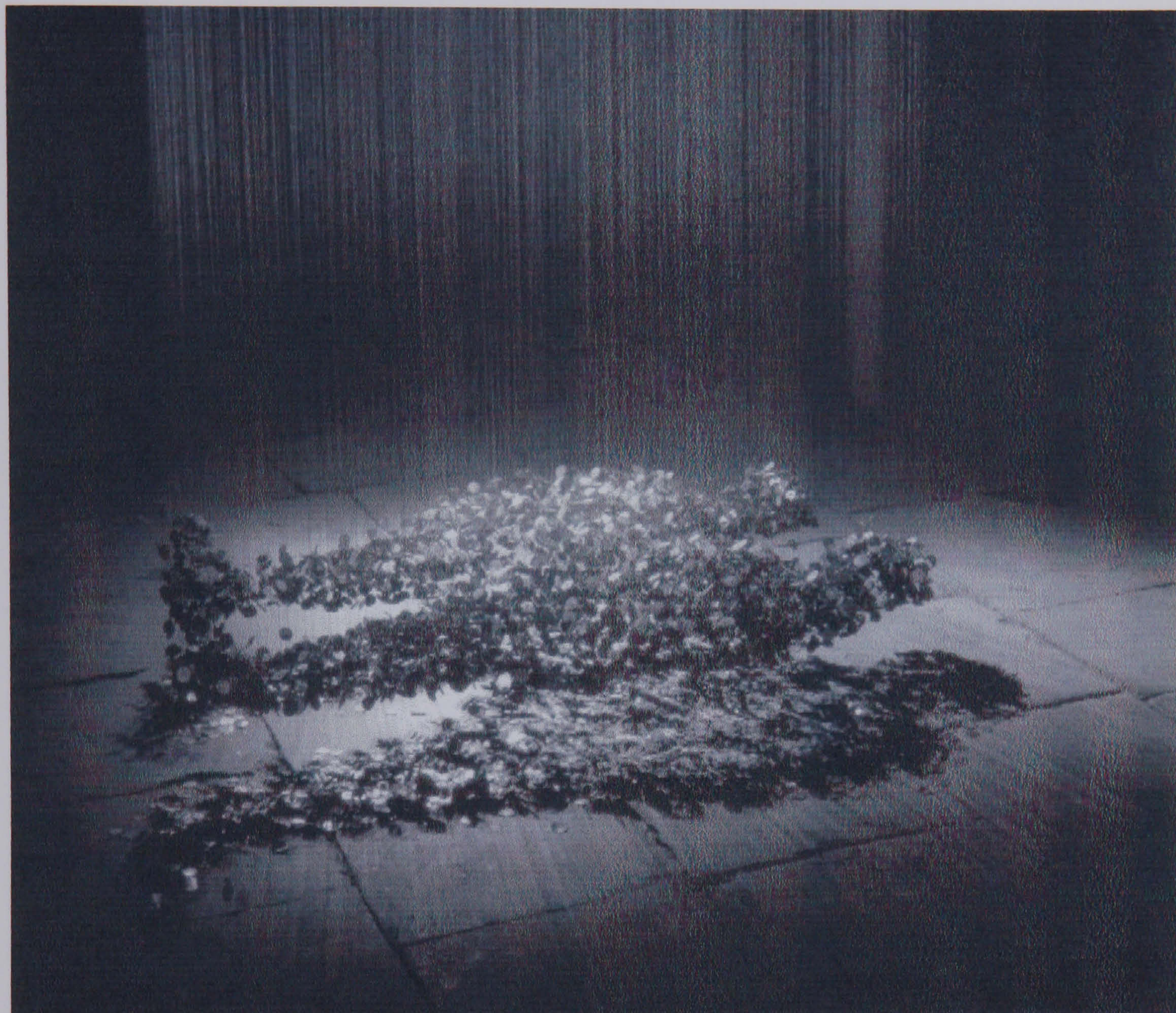


PLATE 28. *MATTER AND WHAT IT MEANS*, Cornelia Parker, 1989. Two figures, two 'bodies' suspended by wire. The nearest of the two appears to hover over the ground, underneath a layer of material — crushed coins — that looks both like the shadow of the hovering form, and the beginning of a partially completed transformation that will see the matter returned to earth: nothing disappears — all matter is resolved into elemental parts and becomes something else.



proof of the destructive powers of the world.”<sup>34</sup> In works like *Matter and What it Means* (Plate 28) she presents an object of recognisable form, a human body form, although it is devoid of humanity itself – we see two ‘bodies’ hover over the ground; the forms are constituted by arranging a mass of crushed coins which are suspended from a ceiling, whilst on the ground itself a layer of coins is positioned to resemble perhaps the shadow of a body, or maybe even to suggest the further disintegration of bodies, or objects, as the matter can be seen to fragment further into the elemental matter of nature; the object as the body returned to earth.

The relationship between garbage and self is brought to the fore in Tony Cragg’s 1980 self-portrait *Harvest*, in which the figure of Cragg, a kind of garbage-shadow on the wall – the physical form once again created by scraps of discarded plastic, is bent over a pile of rubbish on the gallery floor, collecting not the fruit of the earth as in any standard understanding of the significance of the harvest, but rather the visible remains of the consumption of the ‘fruits’ of matter.<sup>35</sup> Identifying the human and the material as of the same source, the relationship a mutually sustaining one.

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<sup>34</sup> In Parker, Cornelia/Boston Institute of Contemporary Arts (2000) *Cornelia Parker*. Boston: 14. In homage to her childhood passion, the coins were run over by a train before being suspended into the form.

<sup>35</sup> Pictured in Cragg, *ibid*: 2.



THREE

GARBAGE

Some of the ancients conceived the *void* as the principle of motion, for they rightly saw the moving principle as the *negative*, though they did not yet grasp that the negative is the self.

G.W.F HEGEL  
*Phenomenology of Spirit*



The world is an accumulation of Sorts, into which we arrange 'things'; objects, both material and conceptual, which we have systematized into types, classes, and other such hierarchies and taxonomies. These are strategies for *Sorting* out the things of the world, and constitute a fundamental and necessary aspect of society; and as such, society can be understood in terms of organization. Society as a non-natural object is a world Sorted.

An absence of organization, on the other hand is illustrative of a failure to reach a settlement, and it is thus also representative of a dissatisfaction further summed up by the contemporary difficulty often found in identifying with the multi-faceted universe of objects. Our ability to sort and order, and the continual effort of doing so, is a necessary part of meeting an ever-changing reality, and of first providing and then sustaining the fabric of society through careful 'grooming.' It is by attaching value to some things and not to other things that establishes this society. That is to say, society is about differentiation.

But, the self-conscious affirmation of what we might deem to be reasonable values is also a negation. Inclusion is at the same time exclusion. And as life is all motion, as we have seen, there remains a difficulty in sorting the world into sensible categories that can ever remain stable, that ever become a *durable* Sort. And this difficulty becomes clear when we see that what modern society has actually established in the differentiation of 'things,' of matter and ideas, is a hidden disorder of Sorts.

In beginning to describe this attempt to control movement by acts of discrimination and identification we will find it difficult to assign to reason a self-conscious desire for destruction. Yet, everywhere in modern society, if only we looked, we would see ruin



and waste, and more specifically in mass consumer society, garbage. In the most basic and practical terms 'garbage' is the production, through consumption, of an external item. It also represents a transformation in value, a transvaluation, established by taking something that is desired, or useful, and exhausting whatever possibilities it is perceived to contain.

That civilization and garbage turn out to be so inseparable is necessary in the sense that order assumes a lack of order *once evident but now overcome* in the present (although it is never finally overcome). The position garbage takes on in experience despite this necessity, however, arises more by chance than by any conscious effort of will. In fact garbage presents itself in contradiction to our willful projects. Which is to say that it belongs to an expanding category of 'accidents' and exceptions that inevitably accompany the autonomous projects of the self-determining modern subject.

Conceptually, 'garbage' is the byproduct of everything meaningful that takes on an accidental configuration in modernity, in that it embodies a hidden potential; it conceals the possible transvaluation of objects. So, as we confront and expand the various Sorts found in modern society we do so by spatially and conceptually arranging all kinds of 'things,' beliefs and phenomena into a meaningful order, one that gives sense and purpose to life. Modern life is thus also a continual process of identification with the world of objects; such conceptual and experiential identities offer the prospect of stability. Nevertheless, amongst all this excellent 'furniture,' which provides the housing for our Sorts, is a hidden repository that reveals, if we can see it, how contingent our Sorts really are.

Contained within this expanding yet largely hidden repository are two types of *Unsort*. On the one hand the arbitrariness of any sort is given by the awareness of profane matter such as bilge and scum, or filth and boak, and this is encountered as natural and necessary. But society in its sorting by exception also contains a barely concealed 'sphere' of the unsorted where past identifications now undifferentiated, and indistinguishable, are deposited. Here the used up remains of past value are placed. Made void.



## 11 Mutations and Unsorts

our/ equations will make any world we wish anywhere/  
we go: we'll take nothing away from here but/  
the equations, cool, lofty, eternal, that were/  
nowhere here to be found when we came

A.R. AMMONS, *Garbage*.

The truth is that this 'making void' is only an act of imagination. Nothing ever disappears. The edifice of society is fashioned over against disorder; and what our imagined present conceals is that the accidents and exceptions that constitute an expansion of chance, and designate a place of banishment for devalued objects nevertheless infringe upon another significant Sort.

There is a ceaseless desire to continually derive an order out of the multitude of identifications that characterize the relations between subject, on one side, and the object world, on the other; and as we shall see, the infinity of possible identifications that in modern society provides the basis for a host of fleeting identifications creates a 'non-space' or inbetweeness, that is neither subject nor object, but at times may take on characteristics of both.<sup>1</sup> Which is to say that the origin of what we might call the Unsort is with the subject, and so to maintain society in the face of what we may suggest are subjective 'disagreements,' or, as we have seen, against indeterminate motion, becomes a matter demanding a high degree of attention. By implication, subjectivity itself undermines such attempts to hold back chance precisely because any category of 'the accidental' in social relations can only arise because of a failure of the individuated subject to reach agreement with an external ideal, an agreement which is paradoxically the demand of reason and society.<sup>2</sup> So, we might suggest that the character of

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example Marc Augé (1995) *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London and New York.

<sup>2</sup> See Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, chapter two. He suggests that this problem originates with Descartes, and asks after the world is put in doubt, "on what basis can the human subject re-establish a connection with the actual world?"



modernity, rather than presenting a familiar and comforting face, one that we can equate with reliability and predictability, actually conceals a multitude of unknown qualities. The edifice of society is thus a mask of games, beneath which relations become fluid, where identities mutate outside of any objective controlling forces.<sup>3</sup> This mask covers not only a potentially divergent history, but also a precarious accommodation of the present combined in experience (subject) and reason (object).<sup>4</sup>

The lack of stability in identity relations is reflected in a transvaluation of objects and so the disorder of Sorts is ineluctable. In the modern world speed and movement show a reluctance to observe the laws of gravity, never mind subjective expectations or social norms of stability.<sup>5</sup> The fundamental nature of movement to modern experience is subjectively manifested in a continual need to break free from the past, which is itself a defining feature of the modern world, and one that teaches us the inevitability of change. The accumulation of accidents, exceptions and contingencies that are concealed by the accumulated Sorts, by this mask of games, nevertheless provide the surface on which we paint the objectively desirable features of modern society. Below this surface is history. History gives life to the present, but with the intervention of memory it also becomes just one product of causal necessity, one amongst many possible (but never realized) histories. As much as objective order and necessity, what defines modern experience is our ability to sort the past and present: in other words modernity aims at the perfection of means to remove the rubbish that clogs up the way ahead.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> On the characterization of modernity as a set of fluid relations, see Harvie Ferguson (2000) 'Deception and Despair: Notes on Ironic Self-Identity in Modernity,' and Zygmunt Bauman (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. On modern society as a game, see Norton E. Long (1958) 'The local community as an Ecology of Games,' *American Journal of Sociology*, 64 (3): 251-261, and Erving Goffman (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York.

<sup>4</sup> On the relation of 'masks' to personhood, see Marcel Mauss (1985) 'A Category of the Human Mind: the Notion of the Person; the notion of the Self,' in Carrithers, M., Collins, S. and S. Lukes (eds.) *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*. Masks are associated not with reason, but with play. See also A. David Napier (1986) *Masks, Transformation and Paradox*. Berkeley.

<sup>5</sup> Although, because no matter ever disappears, the laws of gravity always win out when it comes to the eventual destination of physical objects, and garbage, of course, provides an excellent demonstration of this. For instance a recent newspaper report revealed, "US Space Command is now tracking more than 8,000 pieces of human-made space junk in orbit around earth. That doesn't mean that there are only 8,000: it's just that the organisation's radars can't pick out anything smaller. There are an estimated 70,000-150,000 garbage tiddlers, between one and 10cm, swirling through the space lanes, and millions of dust-sized particles generated by the daily grind of human spacework." *The Guardian* May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> For an understanding of the place of language in this Sorting, see Richard Rorty (1989) *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, New York and Cambridge. The role of memory is explored in Pierre Nora (ed) (1996-98) *Realms of Memory*, New York. The characterization of modernity as a distinctive set of relations between subject and object world is explored in Robert Pippin (1999) *Modernity as a Philosophical Problem*, Ch. 1-3; Hans Blumenberg (1983) *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Cambridge, MA., suggests that there are a number of continuities between the pre-modern and modern ages. The problem of asserting a claim for a distinctive modern age is that history can never start anew (116). The establishment of historical epochs is thus a matter of Sorting.



Here our willful efforts confront a reality that is fateful. In creating such an accumulation of Sorts, predictability, if not certainty, seems within grasp. Yet, the transvaluation of our identifications with the object world uncovers a doubt; if we stop to think about it, we are forced to admit that underlying our ordered expectations is a universe of chance, and this becomes evident with the creation of garbage. Once within sight, chance pokes through a consciousness that is ordered to overlook it. It emerges like a weed that grows between paving stones, if we should happen to allow our gaze to pass over it. And so, with the transvaluation of objects that have ceased to be identified with self, the foreign element hints at disorder, and so we realise that with any change in Sorts the certain can easily become doubtful, and order become *disordered*. Taken as a reversal of expectations, this particular 'dis' might be associated with all kinds of negation, but the disorder of causal expectations goes to the core of meaningful experience; it is a slow reversal that can be debilitating or shocking for the lingering quality of the disappointment it brings forth. This finds analogy in the 'not-quite-nothing,' but 'nothing-definable' of degeneration, characteristic of unformed matter and useless knowledge, sloughed-off mind and body, and just *there*.

There is, then, a necessary degeneration of 'objective' knowledge, and this is a degeneration that is evident in the history of ideas as it is in objective physical matter. Furthermore, it is clear that these two cannot be separated.<sup>7</sup> Doubt over the possibility of truth through knowledge built on an underlying contingent element can produce also a sense of loss, *because* disorder in knowledge and experience is a moment of disconnection – between experience and expectation; between the self and the world; and between subjective and objective. In no uncertain terms the immanent possibility of disorder, which is the suppressed experience of modern life, represents the potential for a radical shaking of belief.<sup>8</sup>

In self-identity, then, as in the history of objective identification on which knowledge rests, reason proves to be fallible and alienating (although always overcoming doubt). More radically still, an immanent disorder, whether or not it is realized, serves as a reminder that reason may ultimately be denied; which of course it always is in its lack

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Thomas S. Kuhn (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago; and Paul Feyerabend (1993) *Against Method*, London.

<sup>8</sup> See Slavoj Žižek (1997) *The Abyss of Freedom*, Ann Arbor. On the proximity of order and degeneracy, see J. Dollimore (1998) *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, London. For example: "progress itself is responsible [for



of power over finality; reason is always the instrumental means of having the evidence of the past Sorted, so as to guide us through the present. But death as the end point of reason is the vital disconnection between self and world, subject and object, and the final change undergone. Death is thus, in one sense, the most obvious evidence of the contingency of life.

But death is also as paradoxical as reason. It is at once the least contingent aspect of a life, and so the most necessary – no one gets out alive – yet, we remain absolutely uncertain about the arrival of the end, so it remains a necessary contingent. Notions of order, by contrast, are represented in language and in everyday life by a diligent Sorting as the best means of fending off death.<sup>9</sup> And that is why in reason the active, realized in our Sorts, must banish the eventful, which is found in the mutation of sorts; it is the broom that clears historical debris.

“The world is groaning, choking with a multitude of creations,” the narrator of Ivan Klíma’s *Love and Garbage* observes. “It is buried by objects and strangled by ideas, which all pretend to be necessary, useful or beautiful and therefore lay claim to perpetual endurance.”<sup>10</sup> Modern society is built on the production of these objects, on the production of novelty, which itself demands obsolescence, and therefore a transvaluation of identities realised in garbage. The identification of subject with variegated consumer products can be understood as a necessary outcome of rational autonomy, which as we shall see is only allowed to develop to such an extent by the ever more fine-grained sorting of our relations with the material world.<sup>11</sup> This is at once the root of a paradox: it is both cause and effect unified in a hope of overcoming the discontinuities between self and world. The “social promise of modernity,” as Robert Pippin terms it, aims to accommodate what appears to be the destructive cycle resulting from progress; to guarantee autonomy when doing so elaborates the contingent ground of modern life. This seems particularly apparent with respect to garbage; the collective rationality of modern society produces more objects as a result of dividing the field of production, and

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the degenerate] in that degeneracy is produced not only by a falling away from the higher, but by the very effort of reaching toward it.” (141-42).

<sup>9</sup> And of course, order is the best way of fending off the inevitability of degeneration; people in modern society live longer lives than at any other time. The point is that the success of reason allows us to forget the degeneration of everything, and as we all know, the odds on dying are perfect. No one has ever succeeded in not dying.

<sup>10</sup> Ivan Klíma (1990) *Love and Garbage*, Harmondsworth: 105.



this, it transpires, has an accelerating effect on the consumption of objects, which is then further manifested as a realization of individual autonomy. The 'social promise of modernity' reaches breaking point because the production of garbage through the latter is constantly pushing back the capacity of the former to Sort, which is to say that individual autonomy challenges collective rationality.

This 'social promise of modernity' faces potential erosion as a consequence of its two components continually clashing.<sup>12</sup> But even more than the paradoxes of freedom, our consciousness of a fundamental and ontological indeterminacy is communicated via the ceaseless motion of degeneration and decomposition that attends life in all its forms. For what chance have our various Sorts against death? Death unsorts all eventually, and so progress on the 'stairway of life' is always followed by a descent that is degenerative.<sup>13</sup> The modern concern with self-determination and self-creation forces us to consider practical contingencies, such as garbage, not only as a negation of self-determination but also, in the end, as an obstacle to *composition*, or social order. These potential subject-object collisions occur within a phenomenal 'sphere' that is understood as the experiential condition, yet sublimated reality, of these relations; the all-pervasive nature of garbage, which is forgotten, sees it as both the medium for sorting consumption in terms of what we value, and thus also the medium that sorts the disordered – that which we no longer value – into garbage. Garbage thus attacks the modern world on three fronts: practically (in the necessity of disposing of it), psychologically (in its effect on self-creation), and spiritually (as the ultimate reminder of death).<sup>14</sup>

This urge to breach the bounds of accepted sense is, of course, a constitutive element of freedom in a world of motion, and is tied up with social and cultural forms that thrive on renewal, which is to say, on destruction. The meaninglessness of modern art, especially post-Duchampian conceptual art, and the discordant eruptions of modern music of the twentieth century are two aspects of a trend that self-consciously pushes back the boundaries of modern experience, risking the charge of 'rubbish,' no less. But of equal importance, and not to be overlooked, the creeping and oozing possibility of

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<sup>11</sup> See also Section One of this work; on the sorting of the microcosmic world, and specifically European civilization's occupation and control of more space and more things, see Joseph A. Amato (1999) *Dust: A History of the Small and the Invisible*, Berkeley.

<sup>12</sup> Robert B. Pippin (1991) *Modernity as a Philosophical Problem*, Oxford. Chs.3-4.

<sup>13</sup> See Midas Dekkers (2000) *The Way of All Flesh: A Celebration of Decay*, London.

<sup>14</sup> A different logic prevails in pre-modern sorting: the carnival celebrated garbage as life. Cf. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) *Rabelais and his World*, Bloomington.



decomposition in modern society is also apparent on another plane apart from these cultural regions where, in a sense, we *permit* and come to accept the exploration of the contingencies of existence as a means of slowly coming to terms with change.<sup>15</sup> There is something else beyond rational meaning, beyond our Sorts that is purely disorder, and it is found in the very materiality of modern living, in the physical objects we consume; meaning in the garbage we produce.<sup>16</sup> By definition garbage is something essentially uncategorical in terms of rational and critical understanding, but something that is brought within grasp of experience in the act of consumption, a destructive act, and present to experience thereafter as an indeterminate or questionable object. In other words, garbage comes to signify a void of meaning in modern life, and in recent decades has been employed as a way of understanding modern life. As we have seen, there has been significant movement amongst successive generations of artists to embrace accidents, to find sources of inspiration in discarded objects.<sup>17</sup> But, just as revolutions in science reordered the world according to a new way of conceptualizing it, we, that is, the artist and the viewer, have sorted this kind of 'garbage' and thus removed it from the void, and as such we have assigned a meaningful identity; the artist, as Barnett Newman observed, attempts "to wrest truth from the void," and this is literally the case with art that utilizes debris.<sup>18</sup>

Having said that, 'garbage art' must be taken as a misnomer because it realizes yet another objectification, and so does not refer at all to garbage. Nevertheless, the fact is that we could not have such a classifiable item as the *objet trouvé*, nor would the objects gathered under such a description generate any 'life' of their own without our first having garbage itself as the source material. So, here as well, in terms of cultural production garbage can be seen as a primary ground of creation. The only difference in the artistic sphere is that 'garbage art' makes the relationship between void and meaning explicit, and given this transformation garbage remains excluded by 'garbage art,' and is still to be found in the hidden repository of the random, the indeterminate and the

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<sup>15</sup> Thus, many people now expect modern art and music to be difficult or challenging where previously it would simply have been called nonsense.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Zizek/Schelling (1997) *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World*, Ann Arbor. Disorder is conceived as *substance* rather than simply *relation*: As the 'ground' of all order this substance is, of course, 'unreal' (order is the real, the known).

<sup>17</sup> This begins with the utilisation of 'transformed utilitarian objects', i.e., objects that were still useful (e.g. Marcel Duchamp's readymades), and is further realised in techniques of collage that utilised physical debris (e.g., the early collages of Kurt Schwitters). This is explored in Section Three, above.



meaningless; it only becomes susceptible to classification once it is brought under some method of ordering experience and hence it is no longer simply garbage, but 'art.'

Garbage is perplexing, and we should perhaps not let a reflexive tendency to try and define it, to Sort it, fool us into believing that we can, by doing this, understand it: because one thing about garbage is that it does not obey the limiting bounds of meaning. Historically, the term 'garbage' originated in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and designated physical waste, the parts of a slaughtered or dead animal – the offal that was beyond use.<sup>19</sup> However, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it had come to take on its modern meaning, as 'refuse in general,' as signifying all kinds of filth, now understood as every kind of externalized object that has passed its useful life. Garbage threatens identity, and in its excess, as illustrative of commercial gluttony, makes another ideal, that of moderation, look like a hollow shibboleth, and it reveals the fragile bounds of normality. Garbage, in short, threatens to engulf us by the mere fact that it never ends. It returns, in a sense, *eternally*, as attendant upon life as life is upon nourishment. Garbage is understood at once as a metaphor for all those accidents, wayward experiences, and 'things' that happen to us all – all the 'crap', we might say – defiant in the face of expectation, and resistant to explanation. Furthermore, garbage extends beyond the material, beyond physical objects, and ends up directing language and belief.<sup>20</sup>

Undertaking a consideration of garbage reveals a gap in our categorical treatment of experience. It does not belong to our Sorts, except as a negatively construed category, and as such it eludes categories, appearing in unexpected places and creating a disorder of Sorts. So, like chance, garbage issues a defiant challenge to will, and in fact the language of garbage becomes, in modern society, coextensive with the language of

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<sup>18</sup> Barnett Newman quoted in Phillipson, 1985, p.11. Scientific revolutions are discussed more fully in Section One, above.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example Stephen Mennell (1985) *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Oxford: 310-16. The word 'offal' referred to both meat unfit for consumption (putrid flesh or carrion), and to assorted offcuts (head, tail, kidneys, heart, tongue, liver, etc.) that were still consumed. On the consumption of offal in medieval times see Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat (1992) *A History of Food*. Trans. Anthea Bell, Oxford. The original sense of garbage obviously derives from the former meaning of 'offal.' See also Deborah Lupton (1996) *Food, the Body and the Self*, London.

<sup>20</sup> See for example, Dominique Laporte (2000) *History of Shit*, Cambridge, Mass., which draws an analogy between public sanitation ordinances, which urged the expulsion of rubbish from public places, and the expulsion of foreign, mainly Latin, forms from official French language. In Don DeLillo (1997) *Underworld*, London, garbage is seen as the cause of civilization: "See, we have everything backwards. Civilization did not rise and flourish as men hammered out hunting scenes on bronze gates and whispered philosophy under the stars, with garbage as a noisome offshoot, swept away and forgotten. No, garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilization in response, in self-defense. We had to find ways to discard our waste, to use what we couldn't discard, to reprocess what we couldn't use. Garbage pushed back. It mounted and spread": 287. This point is also made by Rathje and Murphy (1992) *Rubbish: The Archeology of Garbage*, New York, based on historical evidence.



chance. To put it bluntly, chance is the plastic shopping bag thrown onto your face by an unkind, uncivil wind. Chance is the dogshit you never saw because you failed to look where you were moving, now stuck on the sole of your shoe. Chance is when the world stops making sense; when disorder and degeneration assume prominence. Finally, and not to be forgotten, chance is in the inevitability of death, the certainty of our own 'garbaging,' a potential comfort destroyed by the uncertainty of its arrival.



## 12 The Eternal Return

spring brings thaw and thaw brings the counterforce/  
of planted ashes which may not rise again/  
not as anything as what they leach/  
away from: oh, yes, yes, the matter goes on

A.R. AMMONS, *Garbage*.

Very early every morning – and often the middle of the night – there commences another battle in an interminable but barely noticeable war. The combatants, mostly men, deal not with a foreign nor human enemy, but rather are taken up with a foe that is only too well known to the participants in this curious war. This persistent ‘threat’ they fight has no face, it utters no violent words, yet it keeps coming. Like the tides it never disappears for long. It is our garbage. Safe behind closed doors, we who sleep are rarely reminded that the foot soldier of civilization – the garbageman – has spared us, yet again, the knowledge of how endless the garbage war is.

On the other hand, think of this: the presence of this garbageman, what he represents, is a collective consciousness of this human material waste that threatens – simply in terms of its never ceasing flow – to overwhelm us. But also, and perhaps paradoxically, this figure is the human form of our collective amnesia when it comes to the matter of consumption, permission for us to forget.<sup>1</sup> We are excused, thanks to arrangements that place the garbageman, in a sense, at *our* disposal, the worry of exactly how to dispose of our garbage. Our removal from the fullness of the waste process produces another effect that has long-range implications, however. It separates us also from the disgust that might be induced were this stinking matter not in the hands of the authorities, and this too has its own knock-on effect in making us more sensitive to the presence of garbage. What we don’t witness, the very drudgery of the garbageman’s

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<sup>1</sup> As I go on to discuss below, we are neglectful of the processes that place commodities before us *because* of the commodity form of production itself. It may also be the case that garbage, and I discuss this below as well, is simply



never-ending return conceals something of the significance of garbage. Most people, garbagemen aside, would probably consider clearing garbage as a mindless activity. In a poetic sense this is fitting. For there is such an accumulation of garbage that it is no longer identifiably *anything*, least of all anything that we think is, or was, ours. By this point it has become *other*. In Ivan Klíma's novel *Love and Garbage*, the narrator is a writer turned street sweeper, forced by his employers to wear "some garishly coloured jacket to make sure everyone recognised me from afar and gave me a wide berth."<sup>2</sup> This, as well as the brush he pushes, makes him out to be part of the world of human refuse. These accoutrements are symbols, like traffic signals that regulate our movements, they gradually sink so far back into the consciousness of an onlooker that they begin to become invisible by their familiarity. Once, as a child, the narrator recalls, he was so impressed on observing a Prague street sweeper at work, he had imagined that the duties of the role must have constituted "one of the most important jobs a man can have," but now he knew that this was not so; the street sweepers were people of no importance.<sup>3</sup> He himself was now also a nobody: "simply a person who swept the streets, a person hardly noticed."<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult to be mindful of garbage, at all – who wants to remember crap? That the more or less 'automatic' daily removal of garbage hardly disturbs us acts as an aid to our forgetfulness. The 'invisibility' of people cleaning the streets, we will see, leads to the return of garbage in a more unwelcome guise, because once our trash is out there, bagged, binned and finally consumed itself (though never destroyed) by the hungry jaws of the garbage truck, it becomes simply part of an indistinguishable mass of rubbish, chewed up and eventually ready to be spat out, and to most of us it thus becomes foreign, something to be avoided once disposed of.<sup>5</sup> And, the symbolism of

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obliterated from consciousness as far as possible because it is disgusting and must be avoided. See, e.g. Franz Steiner (1956) *Taboo*, London, and William Miller (1997) *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Cambridge, MA.

<sup>2</sup> Ivan Klíma (1990) *Love and Garbage*, Harmondsworth: 77.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*: 5

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2

<sup>5</sup> The vision of garbage as a foreign element that threatens to engulf us may be summed up, in all its stupidity and paranoia, by the story of the *Mobro 4000*. The *Mobro 4000* was a garbage barge which set out from Long Island, New York in March 1987, and spent the next fifty-five days under the watchful eye of the media as it sailed from port to port in search of somewhere to deposit its 3168 tons of cargo. The sight of this never-disappearing garbage, magnified out of all proportion by the media, induced a subsequent, and it has been argued, damaging garbage paranoia amongst Americans. It turns out that waste-disposal regulations won by the environmental lobby, based on the misplaced belief that there was no more room for garbage in landfills, were the cause of the *Mobro 4000*'s difficulty in finding a home for the garbage. The Long Island landfill site had filled up, and regulations established to protect the environment did not permit the creation of new landfills. However, as subsequent studies have suggested, garbage paranoia is both misplaced and dangerous. Misplaced because calculations suggest that if Americans continue



disconnected, unclaimed objects has a haunting effect, suggesting a corresponding absence of a human once connected to these unsorted objects: "To resonance comes death/ like a shoe without a foot, like a suit without a man."<sup>6</sup>

It is no accident that our discards are already removed, psychologically, from the subjectively imagined Self. What we dispose of is just a material representation of what used to be; garbage is our 'leavings,' a sign of life having moved on, it is life past, representing a death sentence upon the object.<sup>7</sup> As garbage, these 'things' are no longer who we now are, and so symbolically, eventually physically, placed 'outside' our orderly lives. And in a world in which we learn to crave order as a basis of autonomy, as a way of sorting objects and phenomena into discrete, easily understandable categories, a world of therapy (itself a psychological sorting), of soul bearing and twelve-step programmes, the tendency to spot weaknesses in ourselves a failure to be suitably ordered has even led to the characterisation of junk-accumulation as one manifestation of a self-debilitating neurosis. So, we are to understand, the maintenance of the Self actually depends on not allowing the Other to overcome its proper bounds. Thus, the figure of the garbageman may be taken to represent an element of the ideal, healthy and ordered subjective conscience – in other words; we should all be our own 'psychic garbagemen,' removing mental rubbish once past its useful life.

The presentation of 'harmful' effects as a consequence of object-accumulation is an interesting development in modern consumer society, signalling perhaps that changes in fashion, and 'schizophrenic' consumption – that is, consumption as a means of re-making the self – also makes available more objects than one can at any time identify with, and tends, ultimately, toward a gradual unbinding of the Self should this accumulation get out of control.<sup>8</sup> Psychologically this is presented as a battle of organization against lazy dissolution. The kind of Sorting induced by work in making necessary the prioritisation of time, for example, fills life with meaning, and as such

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generating garbage at current rates for 1,000 years, and if all their garbage is put in a landfill 100 yards deep, by the year 3000 this national garbage heap will fill a square piece of land 35 miles on each side. See Rathje and Murphy (1992) *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage* (London), and J. Tierney 'Recycling is Garbage,' *New York Times*, June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1996. Clark Wiseman, an economist at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington made the 35 square mile of garbage calculation – see, 'Dumping Less Wasteful than Recycling,' *Wall Street Journal*, July 18<sup>th</sup> 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Pablo Neruda (1973) 'Only Death' in *Residence on Earth*, New York.

<sup>7</sup> Neruda's poem portrays death as the cleanser: "But death also goes through the world dressed as a broom, she licks the ground looking for corpses."

<sup>8</sup> This kind of fleeting identification is also found in the transient nature of the self as 'drifting' or of oneself being 'drugged' – which is to say, under the influence of mind-altering substances, which, like fashion, institute a temporary sorting of existence on the condition that this is only temporary, and does not take over – unsort – the self.



meaning is established against a void of laziness.<sup>9</sup> Any further movement in this direction and the failure to throw out junk will itself be deemed an illness, although bringing object accumulation within the scope of pathology means objectively ascribing value to certain objects, and that, as we shall see, presents a problem.<sup>10</sup> Leaving aside the problem of value, this suggests that it is simply the volume of objects that creates a problem for healthy living. That is to say, the over-abundance of material objects in modern society is met, at a psychological level, by a corresponding erosion of the power of discrimination. Thus we are ruled by clothes we no longer wear, and so objects that we no longer use, it is said, clutter up our lives, becoming a source of that most modern of ailments, stress.<sup>11</sup>

Garbage, then, affects our lifestyle choices and our personal development, and, the lifestyle psychologists assert that the remedy to this obstacle to movement is to *de-junk*. We reach this state of affairs, as Odo Marquard suggests, because of a key modern phenomenon, what he calls 'the meaning deficit.' In other words, a lack of meaning in modern life is met with a mentality of *demands* that leads, inevitably, to an over accumulation of supposedly 'transforming' objects, exactly because the life one lives in modern society "is empty," Marquard says. Therefore, we need to prevent the creation of a void.

One needs it [life], and everything in it, at least twice over: the second television, the second automobile, the second home, the second PhD, the second wife or the second husband, the second life (in the form, for example, of vacation).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> We can see in Ivan Klíma's novel that the narrator is drawn to a life as a street sweeper as a means of doing *something*, rather than doing *nothing* – because he is unable to write, and indeed he admits to being "frightened by the void of laziness." (101) More than this was the idea that in writing he was reconstituting and giving meaning to life, and writing was thus like sorting rubbish: "it was a different kind of remembrance, one which lifted the incinerated from the ashes and tried to raise them up to new life." (34)

<sup>10</sup> This movement is summed up by the belief that psychological health ultimately depends on 'de-junking' our lives. In other words we should leave aside other self-improvement plans and first get to grips with our garbage. The point being that taking out that trash, organizing objects so they don't 'control' you, leaves little time to reach for that bottle, or those pills! To paraphrase John Locke, clear thinking and good living follow from our ability to clear the rubbish from the pathways of the mind. For 'de-junking' literature see Michelle Passoff (2000) *Lighten Up! Free Yourself From Clutter*, Harper Perennial; Janet Luhrs (1997) *The Simple Living Guide*, Broadway Books; Don Aslett (1984) *Clutters Last Stand: It's Time To Dejunk Your Life*, Marsh Creek. Also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 'Epidemics of the Will.' in *Zone 6*.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Christof Asendorf (1993) *Batteries of Life*, Berkeley; and Arjun Apparurai (1986) *The Social Life of Things*, Cambridge.

<sup>12</sup> See Odo Marquard (1991) *In Defence of the Accidental*, Oxford: 35-36.



The disappearance of meaning in modern life is covered up by a preoccupation with 'things' that become the true carrier of meaning, and instead of substantially replacing the loss instead add 'weight' or clutter to life.<sup>13</sup> The strategy of the lifestyle psychologist as promoter of dejunking is, therefore, to sort this immanent disorder. By rationalising our 'space' we can take steps toward improved mental health. The ultimate result of this external-internal, psychophysical organization and exclusion is to actually throw away, to have fewer things and not just to be better organized.

What is taking place in dejunking is a re-evaluation of objects, and a bringing to the fore of questions of need and utility. Ultimately, good health is equated with a kind of asceticism; it suggests that there can be nothing of value in a space adorned with objects if these serve no purpose. And so, the Dejunkers say, if you do not use an object for, say, six months, it is clearly useless and must be thrown out. At this point we should clearly establish some distinction between the hoarding of objects, on one hand, and collecting objects, on the other.

For instance, to *collect* objects of fascination and affection is at once to fulfil some desire, indulge our capacities for self-expression, and also to impose an order. It is to Sort. Collectors like Sorts of things: cards from decades-old cigarette packets; motor cars; pieces of music; model figures – of 'things' like men, tanks, and trains; or also living things like butterflies or goldfish; indeed consumable items like wine, or Cuban cigars, and so on. Items collected are all objects of value; that is to say in some sense they are use-worthy, or also exchangeable. However, the junk of the Dejunkers is equated with debilitation. Useless junk, then, is value transvalued into matter indeterminate. The neglect of imposing an order on one's life, in hoarding junk, is considered to be indicative of a general dissoluteness that can extend into a tendency to neglect other important parts of life. It is rather like not paying attention to the consequences of what you are doing, whereas being in control demands a constant mindfulness of the future. Thus, the deteriorating relationship between the narrator of *Love and Garbage* and his wife is equated with a kind of blind acceptance that things would continue without requiring any *work*:

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Daniel Miller (1996) *Acknowledging Consumption*, London.



She tried to convince me that what people, including we two, were lacking was ritual. For years we hadn't courted one another very much, and as a result, a mundane element had invaded our relationship.<sup>14</sup>

The eternal return of garbage, therefore, tells us about our tendencies toward inclusion and exclusion, about the possibility of self-creation through our relationship to the world of objects, whether these are inanimate material objects, or people, who we also objectify. On the other hand, if we think once again of the garbageman, we may see that in addition to our own attempts at psychological tidying (efforts which we may not connect to those of garbage as a social problem), this barely noticeable figure conceals a problem that becomes ever more apparent in modern society; and, that is, whilst individual autonomy would seem to rest on an easily removable past, garbage remains a fundamental problem, both practically and metaphorically, that we find increasingly difficult to resolve, and which prompts much ordering of objects and beliefs.

Garbage only becomes a problem as an object of consciousness. In other words, whether it is visible or invisible to us is important. For example, 'clutter,' or household disorganization, is easier to see than garbage, but that is because clutter isn't yet garbage (Plate 29). Because garbage is a social problem, a consequence of the rationalisation of consumption and disposal, our susceptibility to it relies to a great extent on our consciousness of the destructive tendencies of others and ourselves. And such knowledge is compromised by the ease with which modern society has ensured we can forget garbage. If we lack proximity to garbage, or debris of any sort, to the leftovers of living, then we do not have a perspective on our destructive capabilities. So, garbage becomes part of an expanding sphere of contingency because of the very difficulty we find in being mindful of it, given the way modern society has rationalized it out of our lives. The irony is that garbage once rationalized remains a problem for the subject, for autonomy, because of the very success of modern society in dealing with it objectively.

No matter how much we may remain blind to garbage, it is interesting that we perceive the taint of garbage on those who are close to it. Our closeness to dirt and garbage of one sort or another carries significance – in the modern west – for how we see ourselves and how we are perceived in the eyes of others, and we are well enough aware of garbage to want to avoid it. This often comes across in our attitudes towards certain

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<sup>14</sup> Ivan Klíma (1990) *Love and Garbage*, Harmondsworth: 98.





PLATE 29. THE LAST JEWS IN POLAND, Tomasz Tomaszewski, 1993. In recent years there has emerged a lifestyle psychology that promotes 'dejunking.' This aims to convince us that our present and future 'wellness' (as opposed to illness) rests on removing the clutter that clogs up our lives and chains us to the past. Thus, if you are unable to choose which dress to wear to that dinner party, you not only have too many objects, but your indecision is itself junk, an inability to 'sort.' The gentleman pictured above, from the perspective of dejunking or Feng Shui (another variant of the same thing), would be considered disorganized to the point of dissolution. The preponderance of unordered objects is a hindrance to movement, and to 'efficient' living. The fact that he may value all these objects would not matter. The principal point of dejunking is to *remove* objects that control you because you have failed to control them.



kinds of occupations. For instance, there are a large number of occupations that are commonly perceived to be dirty; the jobs we cannot face to do ourselves, or that we delegate to others because they are in some way messy, although this does not entail that material filth is actually dealt with.

Still, the symbolic power of 'dirt' as a property of cast-offs is revealed in the ease with which we attach it to those things, to beliefs, and people that we want to keep away from. "Those who cleansed the world of garbage or rats were never shown any respect," says the narrator of *Love and Garbage*:

A few days ago I read about a jilted stucco worker who, exactly two hundred years ago, in St. Georges church, had slashed the face, mouth and shoulders of his lover, for which he was gaoled, and taken to the place of executing, but was reprieved and instead sentenced to clean the streets of Prague for three years.<sup>15</sup>

And so, as modern society has rationalised our methods of handling the unwanted it has also introduced a boundary, which might be characterised as *a basic minimum of civility*, which allows the separation of the acceptable from the unwanted and the negligible.<sup>16</sup> Our proximity to garbage and to all kinds of dirt and waste helps to locate us socially and signifies also attitudes to self and to health. "As a general matter it is the low, the contemptible, that are contaminating," William Miller suggests in his *Anatomy of Disgust*:

It is inferiority itself that tends to disgust no matter whether it be the inferior position in a classification system of plants or animals or in our own social and moral hierarchies.<sup>17</sup>

The first step in our removal from garbage is therefore to classify and order various kinds of matter and people, in the latter case principally those we equate with disgust-inducing matter, a designation that rests on the 'untouchable' perception of the lowly.<sup>18</sup>

A recent investigation into the increasingly visible social category of 'white trash' in the United States suggested that this name designates "a singular, shameful condition" found not amongst homogenous groups of such 'trash', but instead identifies features

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<sup>15</sup> Ivan Klíma, *ibid*: 5.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Norbert Elias (2000) *The Civilizing Process*, Oxford.

<sup>17</sup> William I. Miller (1997) *The Anatomy of Disgust*: 43.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Douglas (1966) would say 'pollution' here, but it is about the exclusion of social inferiors. See *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London.



characteristic of solitary families and individuals who exist as exceptions to community norms. In particular it is a term of disapprobation directed at 'grotesques.' "In one holler" John Hartigan says:

People continually asked me if I had visited the W\_\_\_\_\_ family, a brood of about eleven parentless teenage and pre-adolescent children, most reputed to be 'retarded' – living in a sprawling shack surrounded by half-cannibalised car bodies with their indigestible innards chaotically strewn about.<sup>19</sup>

These people are 'trash' not in virtue of some lowly occupation that ensures a proximity to garbage, but rather simply in terms of not meeting a level of socially acceptable living, of attaining a basic minimum of civility, that might include not having large numbers of parentless children, nor junk materials strewn across what should be a well-maintained lawn.<sup>20</sup>

The stigma attached to occupationally bound social lowness is altogether stranger. Garbage removal, a primary measure against the spread of disease, would seem to be of fundamental importance to the maintenance of civilisation, and is arguably a prior condition of civilisation, nevertheless our garbage myopia has the consequence of placing the men and women who remove garbage, who clean offices and toilets, right at the bottom of the occupational, if not the social scale, unwelcome in 'polite society.' Like the dirt and rubbish they daily battle against, these social 'menials' become almost invisible, occupying the hazy world of the half-seen that lingers, temporarily, as dusk becomes dawn, where what is seen and unseen easily becomes negligible, unworthy of notice.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike the 'white trash,' who are perceived as a threat because they look out of control – too many children, absent parents, junk lying everywhere – these people are largely compliant with the established hierarchy. In other words, they are 'sorted' and so long as that remains the case the rest of us, in turn, are saved the trouble of confronting

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<sup>19</sup> John Hartigan (1997) 'Unpopular Culture: The Case of White Trash', *Cultural Studies* 11(2), p. 318.

<sup>20</sup> William Miller, *ibid*: 42, discusses the difficulty often found in dealing with uncontrollable numbers of 'lowly' things, or people.

<sup>21</sup> William I. Miller (1997) also speaks of 'moral menials.' See his *Anatomy of Disgust*: 185: "Moral menials deal with moral dirt, or they have to get morally dirty to do what the polity needs them to do...Moral meniality inverts the reward system of social meniality. Garbagemen make paltry sums compared to doctors, although it is hardly clear who contributes the most to public health. But moral menials tend to be nicely remunerated, often in direct proportion to the extent to which they make those moral compromises which so often disgust the impartial observer or the seeker of justice." The metaphor of dirty hands is irresistible in relation to lawyers and politicians especially (think of Machiavelli).



the ceaseless return of garbage. Thus, it is not a matter of accident that the garbage collection is partially hidden by darkness and by the rational geography of the city planners, who have ensured that our waste, and the mediation of waste is cast into the half-hidden (that is, half-existing), network of back alleys; unseen on street maps, but known to these barely visible figures, reflecting their status as a barely tolerable element of society.<sup>22</sup> By the time civilisation is beginning to awake to the day, the garbage trucks are usually long gone, with them the latest collection of cast offs we never really vanquish, no longer our problem (Plate 30).

That this garbage never seems to come to an end, that it proves increasingly difficult to dispose of, produces some interesting observations about what, and why, we throw away. As we lose sight of not only the garbageman, but also in all its material indifference the garbage itself, we also start to forget that garbage can reveal something fundamental about our relationship to objects, and that it may tell another story, one largely hidden, about conditions of living in modern society. To understand what garbage means, to grasp the symbolic significance of it, we need to see it fully within the context of modernity. Garbage has always been with us, this is not denied, but the garbage 'problem' that we are interested in here – the progress of value to garbage – has become a wholly modern problem, and it useful to make a distinction between garbage and dirt. Within both pre-modern and modern contexts dirt and waste are sorted to establish an order: with garbage the content of this sorting has changed as a result of the material difference of life in modern society.

With garbage we seem to move beyond the realm of social custom as the principal regulating mechanism where dirt is concerned, to subjective psychosis over the danger garbage presents to the self. So, whilst garbage is often equated with the unclean, it is more than simply dirt. Dirt is always everywhere, always *nothing*. The point about garbage is that as the material leftovers of rational living, it once was *something*, and so Garbage illustrates the potential impossibility of the 'social promise of modernization,' if not the finiteness of reason, and by the mere removal of the idea that we have produced

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<sup>22</sup> See Dominique Laporte (2000) *History of Shit*, Cambridge, Mass., Chs. 1 and 2 on the development of a sensitivity to the visibility of garbage. He discusses at length a legal edict of 1539, handed down in Paris, which stated "we forbid all emptying or tossing out into the streets and squares of the aforementioned city and its surroundings of refuse, offals, or putrefactions (Article 4)." And "we enjoin that all manner of droppings and refuse be packed into baskets or small hampers and held within the home until such time as it is carried outside the aforementioned city and its premises." (Article 15). Is there anything else on the history of the garbageman?





PLATE 30. MEN LITTERING, Ryoji Akiyama, 1969. The sight of such an accumulation of discards is a sharp reminder that nothing ever goes away, that no matter vanishes. The history of the garbage dump begins when towns and cities became populous enough to make rubbish a highly visible threat to health. For example, an ordinance of Florence Health Officers of 4<sup>th</sup> May 1622 directed that towns within the state would now be required to remove all rubbish to a places beyond human habitation: "we order you immediately...to command that in all places under your jurisdiction everyone should remove and have removed from before their houses all the filth and rubbish which are to be found there...and all that which is in the squares and other public places should be removed by the representatives of the Communities and be carried outside the Towns Villages and *Castelli* to places where they can do no harm." See Carlo Cippola, 1992, *Miasmas and Disease: Public Health and the Environment in the pre-industrial Age*, p.81.



a rationally ordered world, reintroduces a doubt: that we are not too far removed from living in a radically uncertain world.

The constant production of garbage, and the very durability of it – that what we ‘destroy’ in the process of consumption turns out in fact to be indestructible – provokes a need to forget it by placing it *outside*. Out of mind. Out of our ‘space’. Out of our hands, and into the hands of the authorities. The result of this expurgation is that garbage becomes inseparable from processes of self-creation: our only means of flight is, paradoxically, to remain: specifically to remain *inside*. However, the ground of the meaning we derive from such exclusion, rests on the contingency of this object world.



## 13 Flushing is Forgetting...

where the consumptions gather, where the disposal/  
flows out of form, where the last translations/  
cast away their immutable bits and scraps.../  
here is the gateway to beginning

A.R. AMMONS, *Garbage*.

It should not be a surprise that rationalised garbage conceals an important truth about our consumption, namely that it is destruction. In modern society this truth is somehow lost. Yet, any history of human society would reveal our unavoidable destructive capacities, showing that the inevitable result of living is actually waste, simply because to live is, in the widest possible sense, to consume.<sup>1</sup>

But just as garbage is rationalized, so it is that the consumption that produces garbage must be thought of as rational, in that this is goal-driven, as well. In other words, the principal category of garbage that raises the prospect of an expanding sphere of chance in modern society is the material outcome of a rational destruction; it is consequent upon the consumption of goods that ('intend' to) realise the Self.

We can put this in different terms by suggesting that the byproduct of everything valuable may be viewed as garbage. At the most basic level, specifically from the evidence of physical excreta, we see that the most basic and necessary kind of consumption, eating, for example, is garbage-producing. Yet, modern society ensures that many less obvious human behaviours and practices, such as reading, dressing, bathing, and so on, are in fact also ultimately garbage. Everything is finally and undeniably garbage.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Rationalised garbage' is distinct from pre-modern means of dealing with waste, which essentially involved the removal of the person from where garbage fell. See Rathje and Murphy (1992) *Rubbish!*: 32. Although they also note that "there are no ways of dealing with garbage that haven't been familiar, in essence, for thousands of years [...] The basic methods of garbage disposal are four: dumping it, burning it, turning it into something new that can be useful (recycling), and minimizing the volume of material goods – future garbage – that comes into existence in the first place. Any civilization of any complexity has used all four procedures simultaneously to one degree or another." (33) Cf. Georges Bataille (1989) *The Accursed Share, Vol. 1*, New York.



In modern times especially, consumption surpasses the satisfaction of need, a phenomenon resulting from the historical fact that we no longer produce the items necessary for the sustenance of life, or to meet our own needs. The fact that we so readily forget about waste is a direct consequence of the rationalization of the consumption-waste process. Indeed, this goes beyond consumption of 'objects.' It is, in more general terms, a feature of modern society that we individually 'ignore' tasks that have become the responsibility of an objective production process. In pre- and early-modern times, by contrast, the consumption process was vastly different to that which we know today. The existence of home production and subsistence agriculture arguably provided an immediacy of experience with the consumption and disposal process and also, and no less significantly for our views of garbage, with the life cycle itself. In these times, and under such conditions, it was evident that a 'coming to be' and a 'ceasing to exist' attended all objects, all goods, and ultimately all living things. In other words, we would have been aware of the origin of goods we consumed simply because we would have produced them, and likewise would also be aware of the destination of the associated waste byproducts because we would have had to dispose of them personally.<sup>2</sup>

This has largely ceased to be the case. Modern society determines that, for most of the time, we purchase and dispose of goods (or, to put it another way, engage in commerce) with the aid of a number of mediators.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the immediacy with which consumer products become available in new transformed versions is astounding. Where progressive obsolescence may have once been restricted to the motorcar, it is now evident on the packaging of the most mundane objects.

Before modernity had bequeathed the often overlooked mechanical means of transporting shit, sewage and garbage to those nether regions where it is even less likely to affect our consciousness or offend our senses, the removal of the debris of life – whether it be evidenced by garbage or excreta – was a practical problem that had to be met without the benefits of the technological wonders we are so familiar with today.

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<sup>2</sup> S. Ewen (1988) *All Consuming Images*, pp. 236-37. See also Susan Strasser (1999) *Waste and Want*, New York, on 'the stewardship of objects' that she identifies as a common feature of urban life prior to mass consumerism (Ch.1.)

<sup>3</sup> Money has been viewed as a 'substance' devoid of concrete properties, and this allows it to get everywhere: see Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1978) *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, London: 53-54. Money and garbage, thus, seem to share several characteristics that allow us to suggest they are eternal: (1) Timelessness, (2) Formlessness, and (3) Both are in constant transformation. On the comparison between money and faeces see Sigmund Freud (1953) 'Character and Anal Eroticism' (orig. pub. 1908) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete*



Shit and waste was carried out, or simply dumped from windows, remaining where it fell until it could no longer be ignored.<sup>4</sup>

Unless one has a high level of tolerance to the effects of the disgust inducing, the removal of such 'natural necessities' would indeed have been eventually unavoidable, and the pace of life would in many ways have been dictated by looming decay, even if standards of cleanliness arrived relatively late in modernity, after life had, so to speak, started to gather speed.<sup>5</sup> It is arguable that the extent to which dealing with excremental waste remains in the 21<sup>st</sup> century an unavoidable matter of daily living could quite accurately be said to illustrate the lagging, or non-existent, effects of modernity, meaning, on the one hand, the absence of a fully rationalized waste disposal system that is universally found within a particular culture, and on the other, the lack of a convention of an individuated identity.<sup>6</sup> This latter development is important, and its causal effect on habits of cleanliness in establishing a 'privatized' space that separated one body from another, should nevertheless not deflect us from suggesting that the individuated identity of the modern subject may actually have been a consequence of the overpowering effects of waste in medieval towns and cities.

It is crucial to understand here that what we now know as garbage can be traced as a social category to the privatization of human wastes, meaning that evidence of its social

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*Psychological Works*, London: 167-76. On circulation, Georg Simmel (1978) *The Philosophy of Money*, London, and Christof Asendorf (1993) *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Carlo Cipolla (1992) *Miasmas and Disease*, New Haven: 81, and Dominique Laporte (2000) *History of Shit*, Cambridge, Mass., chapter one. There is also an interesting point to be made here about experience and time. Just as in consumption the modern world allowed us to, in a sense, speed up, by permitting and facilitating acquisition in advance of need, so mechanical means of waste disposal permit us to abolish the decaying effects of time from immediate experience, this by the mere fact that it is done on another's time. And as Dominique Laporte (1999) tells in his *History of Shit* no less a figure than Jeremy Bentham had urged the recycling of shit: 'We never exercise, or at least should never exercise a *besoin* [Fr.= 'need'] as pure loss. It should be put to use as manure': 119-20

<sup>5</sup> It depends what we take as evidence of standards equivalent to 'modern standards.' It seems that there is a gradual development in these standards. Thus, whilst Lawrence Wright (1960) *Clean and Decent*, London, cites evidence that London's mediaeval latrines were barely tolerable by the turn of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, we might prefer to locate 'a modern standard of cleanliness' as equivalent with improvement in standards of hygiene brought about by the invention of the first flushing toilet in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Dominique Laporte, *ibid*, suggests that 16<sup>th</sup> century ordinances on the disposal of household waste were an attempt to revive the Roman sewers in Paris (see Ch.2), although whether or not Romans had something akin to the privy, or latrine, he says, is less clear (44-45). It is really difficult to assess when something like contemporary standards of cleanliness became widespread. Norbert Elias, for example, dates the beginning of a 'civilizing process' that was evident on several fronts, to the 16<sup>th</sup> century as well. However, there is no mention made of either the gradual privatization of shit or menses. William Miller (1997) in *Anatomy of Disgust*, argues that disgust conventions can guide us here. These, he says, are clearly evident in the Middle Ages, suggesting a level of civility that Norbert Elias largely failed to see or acknowledge. He interprets Elias as illustrating not an increase in disgust that then prompted this civilizing process, but rather a redistribution of existing disgust, thus, "changes in the levels of disgust in a culture can be reconceived as changes across different cultural domains, as, say, from the religious to the secular, from *what* gets eaten (as in the taboos of ritual prohibition) to *how* things get eaten (as in having proper table manners)." See Miller (1997) *ibid*: 143-178, and Norbert Elias, *ibid*: 45ff.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, J. Donzelot (1980) *The Policing of Families: Welfare versus the State*, London, cited in H. Ferguson (2000) *Modernity and Subjectivity*, Charlottesville: 44-49.



status, for example, in public ordinances, suggests a corresponding private responsibility. Indeed we can suggest that such privatization of waste, certainly in towns and cities, predates modern philosophical notions of the individuated subject by several hundred years. This makes it very difficult to establish what is causing what: are we more disgusted with the waste of others because we have developed this individuated identity, or have we seen the creation of such an identity as a response to the conditions found in suddenly being thrown together in towns and cities?

Whatever the answer, there is clearly one significant inference we could make, and that is to say civilization developed as a response to this alienated waste, this ‘garbage.’ This is a view supported by the Garbage Project at the University of Arizona, based on archeological evidence.<sup>7</sup> Taking an altogether different approach, Lawrence Wright, in his fascinating history of toilets and bathrooms, argues that in medieval Britain evidence can be cited to support the view that the ‘privatization’ of waste can be dated as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century. “Among the lower orders there were some private latrines,” he says, citing:

Housing ordinances of 1189, requiring that garderobe pits, if not walled must be at least 5½ ft. from the party line [i.e. the line that defines ownership of property]; if walled, 2½ ft.”<sup>8</sup>

The ‘garderobe’ itself, was usually built “within ample thickness of the walls [of the house], each with its own vertical shaft below a stone or wooden seat” often situated above a stream or moat below the house. Even the name ‘garderobe’ hints at how averse people must have been to bodily waste, meaning something like a ‘private room’ (hence, ‘privy’), or ‘wardrobe.’

This was just one of many euphemisms used in England, according to Wright, that point to bodily waste taboos, as did other “coy evasions” such as ‘necessarium’ or ‘necessary house.’<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the suggestion that some medieval people had already seen the beginning of a privatized waste process – certainly by the 13<sup>th</sup> century – is not only attested to by the existence of public ordinances, but also in the apparent evidence that medieval people were extremely averse to the sights and smells of human waste. Wright also cites evidence of contractual documents that show the men who were employed to

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<sup>7</sup> See William Rathje and Cullen Murphy, *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence Wright, *ibid.*: 50



clean privies were extremely well paid. For example, he mentions an account of work carried out at Newgate Jail in 1281:

When thirteen men took five nights to clear the 'cloaca' (i.e., sewer), at a total cost of £4. 7s. 8d. This was then thought a high figure, but the men were paid three times the normal rate.<sup>10</sup>

No doubt on account of how unattractive this kind of work had become.

There was still widespread use of communal latrines in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, but we might argue that the conditions of many people living together in towns or cities, and the fact that people were relatively immobile must have increased a sensitivity to waste well before philosophical elaborations of an individuated identity. In medieval times, then, and of importance to the development of a view of modern garbage, we must locate the origins of the noxious power of human waste to the absence of opportunities to simply go elsewhere and escape it. Thus an inability to remove oneself from these wastes is evident in complaints made in 1300 to the King and Parliament about the "putrid exhalations" of Fleet River in London, which like many rivers at the time, had latrines built over it as the most efficient means of removing waste. By the same time we can see that the deficiencies of this kind of arrangement are becoming both difficult to avoid, and difficult to live with; in 1300 as well Sherbourne Lane, a place once remembered fondly as, Wright tells us, a place where one would find dwellings adjacent to a "long bourne of sweet water" – an attractive place, in other words – had through time come to be known by the designation that identified the qualitative change in living conditions – "Shiteburn Lane."<sup>11</sup>

In modern society the private flushing toilet, then, is not a luxury, but rather an indicator of minimum standards of civility, evolved to its current state over nearly 1000 years on these islands, and like window panes and light bulbs, a pre-condition of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid: 47

<sup>10</sup> Ibid: 49. Compare with modern times where sewage workers are generally lower paid *because* of their association with disliked waste.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid: 51. That all this was the result of people having to live in close proximity to one another in towns and cities is clear. Less well-known perhaps, but also cited in Wright's fascinating book, is that Leonardo da Vinci had not only invented a folding closet seat by the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but that he had invented a bathroom door that, by utilizing counterweights, closed automatically, thus keeping the room private. And in a proposal for ten new towns, aimed to fight the causes of plague and death, he incorporated a drainage system that would accommodate "all private and public privies, and all garbage and street sweepings...to be carried by rivers," and "all the stairways in the tenement buildings were to be spiral, to prevent the insanitary misuse of stair landings." See Wright, *ibid*: 54-55.



civilization.<sup>12</sup> We can look at this another way: the absence of the magic handle that produces the cleansing, silver flush that allows us to start anew is really the absence of some advanced system of social rationalization. The flushing toilet of every modern home, the height of the privatization of human waste, signifies a triumphant advance in modern society.<sup>13</sup>

The widespread arrival of domestic plumbing, in the form of bathroom closets containing a toilet, bath and sink with running hot water, is one of the most important consequences of the ever more complex nature of the separation and specialization of productive work. It is through the multiplication of various tasks, personal and non-personal, whether originally private or communal, that modern society has industrialized production processes by a division of tasks and developed a level of social rationalization that has reached beyond the sphere of the creation and consumption of mere necessities and through which society has 'propelled' itself forward into the world of abundance many of us now know. This, there is little doubt, had the *necessary* effect of depersonalizing the waste process, as one of many essential processes now rationalised, (another obvious one being food production). But the developmental process is entirely complementary and depends on the return of a causal effect to its origin, thus ensuring a progression that modifies and perfects systematic anomalies. So, the end result is that without someone else to take out the garbage, specific kinds of industrial production become quite impossible. Almost universally, by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, we are already one step removed from the consequences of our own waste in that we need never see it. Gradually, in more advanced cultures, we have moved even further to the point where progressive obsolescence makes the old so commonplace that we show no concern about dispensing with it. But this is, it seems, no cause for concern. Modern society, in the form of the division of labour, provides the means of expulsion, and this is, of course, found in the person of the garbage collector. Which is basically the same as saying that when you no longer have to empty your chamber pot, or dig out your privy personally,

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<sup>12</sup> Ralph Lewin (1999) *Merde*, London, however, quotes a sceptic on this matter: "As the missionary Bibles once spread the light to savage hearths around the globe, the porcelain john will soon spread the Word of Technology to every home of the Great Unwashed." (67)

<sup>13</sup> Some kind of flushing system is found as early as 2000BC, although this is not mechanized. The Palace of Knossos on Crete had seen the introduction of an elaborate drainage system that allowed for passage of a 'sewer-man' through wide drainage channels, although these were sometimes flushed with torrential rainwater. See Wright (1960), *ibid.* Ch.1.



on a regular basis, it is understandable that you might not give a second thought to the eventual destination of your shit.<sup>14</sup> Flushing, after all, is forgetting.

Not without coincidence the notion of flushing contains a peculiarly modern aspect; it throws up associations with newness and motion, not to say the very 'fluidity' of modern life. As Zygmunt Bauman observes, there are good reasons for considering fluidity and 'liquidity' as "fitting metaphors when we wish to grasp the nature of the present." The past is equated with 'rigidity' and 'solidity,' whilst 'fluids' are 'light,' 'travel easily' and are associated with inconstancy.<sup>15</sup> This can be seen in the matter we flush away, which is broken down by the force of the water that propels it from our lives. Flushing then sums up in one way our present attitude to objects, and can be thought of as nothing less than the removal of a previous necessity to be mindful. Flushing means there is one task less to think about, and that one is free to concentrate on more important matters. In fact, this gradual progression has reached the stage where some modern public toilets present themselves to the user as if totally untouched, and thus the question of the regular function of the equipment is not only easy to forget, but is, in some sense, denied. This all points to an uneasiness with being reminded that other people shit, and they may have used the same space to do it as we do. As Ralph Lewin describes it, this latest innovation is comprised of a disposable plastic covering, fresh-sealing the toilet, an operation "that can be renewed automatically by pressing a button, and [also] a device for the irradiation of the toilet seat with ultraviolet light."<sup>16</sup> These devices may not be universally known, but the point is that they represent the latest modification of a necessity long banished, namely the need to be personally responsible for your own waste, and this produces the crucial element of forgetfulness. Just compare this with "going out for a walk with a spade" as Lewin says men in the trenches during wartime would do, indicating no less of a sensitivity to the communal

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<sup>14</sup> The first flushing toilet that resembles the modern object dates from 1596. Wright, *ibid*, describes a valve water closet invented by Sir John Hartington, that had "a seat with a pan, a cistern above (in which are shown fish swimming, but only to indicate water), an overflow pipe, a flushing pipe, a valve or 'stopple' and a waste with water-seal." pp.71-3. This kind of arrangement was gradually perfected and reached the current form, known as the 'washdown closet' in 1889. Of course, it took until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in some British households before such a luxury was available within every household (as opposed to in a brick shed outside the home). See also Ralph Lewin, *ibid*: 55-64, and 66-68, who notes that the first patent for a mechanically flushing toilet was taken out in 1775. Also included here is a short discussion of the variety of cultural developments in this technology.

<sup>15</sup> Zygmunt Bauman (2000) *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: 2-14.

<sup>16</sup> Lewin *ibid*: 61. See also Gilles Lipovetsky (1994) *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, Princeton, for related comments on fashion, which is, as we shall see below, intimately bound up with disposal: "No economy of the ephemeral can exist without the synergistic action of major cultural objectives such as comfort, aesthetic quality, individual choice, and novelty. (153)



effects of defecation suggestive of a privation, which itself entails that should our automated means of disposal ever break down, we would soon be well aware of it.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, a lack of mindfulness is both necessary and unavoidable for the most part. The division of labour has produced a major side effect, the positive features of which are unlikely, and this is *ignorance*.<sup>18</sup> There is no paradox in this. To be modern, after all, is also to learn how to forget, and in a fuller, more positive sense, to learn how to live without knowing. Memory it is easy to see is both the source of a subjective doubt, and also the graveyard of progress. The past is nothing more than the rubbish we need to eject, and so the expanding sphere of garbage is intimately entwined with an impulse to live in the present. This, not surprisingly, creates a need for the constant renewal of the terms in which we may identify with the world.<sup>19</sup> So, the obverse of the waste process, which proceeds historically to a level of efficiency that allows more time for active consumption – as does a minimization of any productive task – is realised in the production of ever more novelties.

Modern society, we might say, has created an economy of ignorance. Strategic forgetting acts as a means of negotiating a world of objects, and once formalized becomes a kind of ‘rational ignorance.’ So, embracing the future only makes sense if we understand the necessity of metaphorically burying the past, like so much rubbish.

Still, there remains a difficulty in understanding the actual basis of this forgetting, of how the conditions of modern living specifically reinforce it. What is clear is that if choices are not present, then action becomes rather a matter of social reflex, like taking the path most trodden, and this seems odd because it tells us that we trash the past by walking over its remains. Thus learning to forget is a matter of social adaptation.

The evidence of this casual dumping of past is actually an important part of our everyday experience, conscious or not, and to live in the present becomes always the same as a gradual erosion of what went before, and this is most obvious in fashion. The present soon enough becomes past in the face of the new, and advertising, with

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. José Saramago (1995) *Blindness*, London. In this story victims stricken with an inexplicable and infectious blindness are confined to prevent its spread. With their separation from the rest of society, and with the loss of sight comes the inevitable problem of not being able to control human waste. The author brilliantly conveys the devastating effects of the removal of a once rationalised system of waste disposal.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. F. Nietzsche (1995) ‘On the Utility and Liability of History for Life,’ in *Unfashionable Observations*, Vol. 2. Stanford, CA.

<sup>19</sup> If modernity is the removal of tradition, and the movement to constant renewal, perhaps more dangerous aspects of memory, such as nationalism, and one of its more destructive side-effects, war, are just the rubbish of memory.



seemingly evangelical fervour, begs us to cast off the once cherished but inevitably faded objects in a dream of a glittering future. As one enthusiastic observer notes, consumption of objects thrives on an “order of ‘autonomous’ phenomena, responding only to the play of human desires, whims and wishes.”<sup>20</sup> Meaning that in an age where the lack of objective meaning has created a void, the only response is to be found in a subjective identification with the object world. The citizen of such a world has modified the Cartesian *cogito*; now we exist as we consume. The new washing powder...the new car...the new kitchen...the new YOU!<sup>21</sup> “Fashion,” according to Mark C. Taylor, is “profound in its superficiality.” This is because it functions as the highest contemporary realization of modern society as a mask of games. And so, “the profundity of fashion does not involve depth but reflects the infinite complexity of a play of surfaces that knows no end.”<sup>22</sup>

The consumption process thrives only on the creation, and expectation, of a demand – achieved by tapping into the modern attachment to novelty, itself created as one of the foundational institutions of modernity. Once desire has been awoken, rarely, if ever, are we prompted to consider one crucial aspect of the life of the shimmering object of desire, and that is the necessity of its eventual demise in our affections. Walter Benjamin saw fashion as a “provocation of death,” always becoming “something new, something different” as death closes in.<sup>23</sup> Such insights, however, escape the awareness of the general consumer of modern society. Indeed, for the ‘machinery’ of the consumption process to make this evident would be self-defeating. Why draw attention to the very opposite of what the object is intended for? The used up object is the object devalued, no longer desirable. The crucial point is that the specific value of the new object is contained in the desire that craves it, and this may have little to do with its ostensible function. And thus the object is in a sense also spiritualised – it assumes an alchemical power beyond its functionality.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Lipovetsky, *Ibid*: 24.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Thomas Hine (1995) *The Total Package*, Boston, on the proliferation of unlikely items of fashion; cleaning products, as items that remain private, and are not on public display, are one good example of the distinctive nature of subject-product identification. Hine notes that in the mid 20th century, Proctor and Gamble, originally a soap and candle maker, saw the limitless potential of detergent technology. Thus, shampoos, liquid detergents, dishwasher detergents, and household cleaners came to occupy whole aisles of a typical supermarket, products whose purposes were once fulfilled by soap (150-51).

<sup>22</sup> Mark C. Taylor (1997) *Hiding*, Chicago: 167.

<sup>23</sup> See Walter Benjamin (1999) *The Arcades Project*, Harvard: 63.

<sup>24</sup> The idea that value is a property of an object, either in terms of its use-value, or in terms of labour power seems, in both these senses, to be of limited use here. The former sense of value is complicated by the junking of still



At this point consumer awareness may simply be restricted to the presumed transforming powers of the object, and it would be unusual, caught in this state of desire, to be simultaneously concerned with the eventual uselessness of the object. The day that this happens on a large scale will be the day when dreams are snuffed out at inception, when reason finally overcomes desire, and thus, to invoke the finite properties of the object, or more specifically the temporality of desire, is merely to raise the perception of 'ends'; of decay, of age and uselessness, of exhausted potential, and of the ultimate impossibility of dreams. Memory of the past, then, effectively destroys the vision of the new object that advertising has become so successful at creating.

One consequence of the failure of memory to intervene and bring desire back to reality, down to earth, is that apart from committed 'neophobiacs', modern society remains largely *ignorant*, often willfully so, of the inevitable end that the once cherished and shiny new objects will find.<sup>25</sup> The neophobiac, in recognizing that progress is accompanied by hazardous side effects, sees degeneration looming everywhere, and in everything. The social amnesia that this produces rests, we can see, on the objective and rational means by which we consume and dispose, and they in turn rest on the separation and specialization of knowledge and production, by the division of productive tasks. This rational process can be summed up in three words: forget, consume, and destroy. On examination we see that these terms are equivalents. To destroy, then is to consume; to forget is to leave behind, to destroy; and to consume is to banish need; also in a sense to forget.

It seems that modern society in some way engages in a self-perpetuating motion once embarked down this particular road, and that there is little prospect of a return. Gilles Lipovetsky suggests that economic forces which operate on the basis of fashion follow directly from scientific progress and the logic of competition, found in most societies. "Supply and demand revolve around novelty," he notes. And:

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useful objects (although we may restrict such a general observation to people born long after the austerity measures that characterised the inter-war and post-WWII period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). The notion of value adhering in labour power suffers as well where the desirability of goods creates a value that is entirely devoid of any relation to a value that could be identified in the production process. Karl Marx describes this as 'commodity fetishism.' See *Capital Vol. 1*. Ch.1, sec.4. Gilles Lipovetsky (1994), *ibid*, also suggests that desire will remain elusive, the product of "intimate and existential motives, psychological gratification, personal pleasure, and product quality and usefulness." (147)

<sup>25</sup> On the use and context of 'ignorance' here – 'ignorance' is the primitive 'stuff' from which knowledge separates itself. Which is to say that knowledge is the ordering of the unsorted. So, in this sense, ignorance precedes knowledge as the ground on which the edifice is built. We can confuse ignorance with 'error' however, although there is a distinction to be made. 'Error' occupies a different relation to knowledge than ignorance, insofar as what is in



Obsolescence is accelerating: specialists in marketing and innovation can assure us that within ten years 80 percent to 90 percent of our current products will be outmoded; they will appear in new forms with new packaging.<sup>26</sup>

The accuracy of such forecasts may be questioned, but in the end it is less important that the recognition of a general trend in modern western societies that sees the creation of new objects at an apparently unstoppable pace. The concentration of time and effort that goes into the division of productivity, and into such permanent innovation as this kind of consumption demands (and which also provides the multitudinous objects of desire), effects an acceleration not only of consumption itself, but in general of alternative means of self-creation as well.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, existing identities become contingent as fast as they are established, and thus chance characterizes our relationships to the object world. There are benefits of such seeming disorder, and they cannot easily be scoffed at. The rationalization of productivity has meant that we now, more than ever before, need spend less time on the necessary tasks of life; the things that would drag us, so to speak, back into the slime, and have, hypothetically at least, created more time for leisure. Once again, it is crucial to understand that this is only possible so long as we voluntarily give up on the idea that we can know and do everything for ourselves, and specifically that we should be detained by those tasks that have immediate consequences for our daily life. In this sense also (that of voluntarily ceding control), we might suggest that to be modern is also of necessity to be subjected to a variety of social and personal doubts: in becoming experts in certain fields, we risk incompetence, and uncertainty, in others. So, just as garbage is the byproduct of consumption, we must see that forgetfulness, ignorance, and finally anxiety, are the result of industrial and technological specialization, and as such are predicated upon the growth of a modern kind of knowledge we might well deem to be ignorance-based-knowledge, and which thus might be best characterised as a *net social increase* (but absolute individual depreciation) in expertise, consequent upon the abandonment or replacement of traditional modes of production.

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error has already been tried and discarded. So, to be clear, error is the garbage of knowledge, whilst ignorance is the undifferentiated ground of knowledge. In one sense both are 'garbage' in that they constitute a void.

<sup>26</sup> Lipovetsky, *Ibid*: 135.

<sup>27</sup> Again, it's worth quoting Lipovetsky: "The fashion economy advances in a forced march, as it were, with the indispensable seduction of change, speed and difference." *Ibid*: 135.



This idea of doubt is central to the modern sensibility, and is fully realised, in the social veneration of speed and efficiency, which is made material in an ever more baffling array of objects, which are ever more confusing to the subject in their technological complexity, demanding an ever increasing army of experts to service them, and so perhaps then ultimately the source of anxiety about one's own being.

In modern times, then, knowledge is not necessarily anything at all to do with wisdom, or logos – of being able to apprehend the world, but rather an approach to the world, in other words, a socially useful power of adaptability and expediency, arising because the problem with too much thinking and too much knowledge is that it is too rooted in the past. The modern economy, as the apex of the general utility of this rational Sorting of the world, would have difficulty functioning without the development of such varied expertise, and without the consequent ignorance that it entails, for better or worse. As the historically realised consequence of an increasing perfectibility in mechanized (efficient) processes, and of increased consumption of new goods and services, this progress, far from meeting the needs created by advertising, appears not to satisfy the modern appetite. Rather it provokes a greater demand for new objects and experiences. And so desire expands, to be filled up eventually, as the Dejunkers warn, with garbage.

The end result of this profane cycle is that we have little need for *memory* when it comes to the transvalued object, because it is already Sorted as garbage. Like all the knowledge, and all the objects no longer personally required in our infinitely complex and technological world, it is committed to the void; knowledge or meaning never really born, never identified but aborted. The irony is that where the production of 'ignorance-based-knowledge' is concerned, my knowledge negated is someone else's knowledge affirmed. But as much as we try to stick to this unconscious and sometimes haphazard arrangement, experience may often drag us back, and an occasional reminder, such as the glaringly visible sight of accumulated garbage, or the stench of a blocked toilet, offers just enough of a glimpse of the indestructibility of garbage to make us stop, and reflect on how easily the whole edifice could collapse.

Although given the modern temperament (described here in admittedly general terms), this may be reflection only for a moment. And so it is, and will apparently remain; from the mountains of rubbish and piles of unburied corpses that toppled the British government in 1979, to the Mobro 4000 garbage barge, homeless and lodged in



the minds of Americans for fifty-five days in 1987, to the collapsing garbage heap of Manila, the previously unobtrusive home to 20,000 scavengers until a landslide brought garbage down upon the makeshift shacks that served as homes, killing hundreds; like every other garbage crisis, these are flashed repeatedly across our television screens as a reminder of an unwelcome truth. There is a lot of garbage out there. Maybe on those occasions we see our own destructiveness, and recognise that nothing ever goes away, but these disasters and crises remain exceptions to the normal course of experience, not to mention that they become almost unnoticeable to the magpie nature of modern consciousness, which sees facts like conveniences, to be taken up or cast off at will. Like the object that becomes garbage, in fact.

In terms of the 'things' we come to value, those objects of desire that erase the past, that promise transformation, making a contrast between the allure of a glittering new object and the contempt we show towards what is left of it when it becomes old, when it is used up (or when we are 'fed up') is instructive, if not enough to provide a revelation of the creeping contingency of the world and of the life of objects. What such a contrast reveals is that the duality of our perception of the object *as one thing* that becomes *another thing* is not simply marked by a qualitative change; say, one that corresponds to a change in the material object and that does so over a period of time. This duality is also intrinsic to the usability of the object itself. Which is to say that at an important level of consciousness we are well aware of the eventual negation of desire, and this is in spite of the necessity of forgetting that itself marks the beginning of desire. And this, it would seem, is due in part to the speed with which disappointment can be banished by fresh desires, always prompted, of course, by new objects, or the 'need' for these.<sup>28</sup>

We should remember then that to consume is literally 'to destroy or expend'. In modern consumption – which we can see tends to satisfy desire beyond need – there seems to be more expending of value in terms of being fed up or satiated with some object, than with the 'wearing out' of use. The most obvious result of this is that we dispose of 'goods' for reasons less to do with the 'good,' or useful capacity (if that is what it is) having been exhausted. It is rather that we dump such stuff because we become sick of the sight of it, almost because we foresee that it will become old and worn, and perhaps suggestive of our own ageing processes.



The deterioration of the consumer object in subjective perception arises on a number of levels: in experience, in expectation, in advance of the eventual demise of the physical object, and if not that, in advance of the dissipation of its once magical, but now waning powers. Effectively this movement presents a clear contrast between *novelty* and *utility*. As consumers, we obviously see ourselves, in the act of consumption, fulfilling some idea of who we are, or who we want to be. We are buying the self, which is to say we are buying yet another disguise. Under such circumstances, we each, as Gilles Lipovetsky so perceptively puts it, “become a permanent decision-making center, an open and mobile subject viewed through the kaleidoscope of merchandise.”<sup>29</sup>

The purchase of a commodity in directing this motion itself therefore involves chance. Buying is the big Maybe, a gamble.<sup>30</sup> Thus non-utilitarian consumption, that is, fashion, appears schizophrenic in the sense that it reveals both an inability to settle one’s mind on some particular object, and also a problem in resolving the tension that gives rise to desire, because it needs to be continually renewed.<sup>31</sup>

Where desire is concerned we cannot get away from novelty, or from fascination and the attraction of surprise. Objects seen in this light thus take on an almost magical or transforming power, representing the possibility (no matter how fleeting this may be) of a crucial change in self-identity, an affirmation of being, and thus a fulfillment of the autonomous will (whether or not the belief in this will is misplaced under these circumstances – given the supposed effect of advertising – is another question). This is the realisation of some kind of longing for an eternal, unending aspect of experience, no matter that it cannot be sustained because we are only ever temporarily satisfied. The process of expenditure and exhaustion is self-sustaining, and obviously creates a need for replacement. This is the genius of fashion: contempt of the old demands invisibility, and that always leaves space for a replacement.

Acknowledging that the object only ever represents newness for an instant raises the possibility that objects have a more ‘characteristic’ property than what desire ‘determines.’ The undeniable conclusion must be that the object is simply garbage in waiting, temporarily refashioned from previous garbage in its current use, to meet some

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<sup>28</sup> See Mark C. Taylor, *Ibid*: 167-217. Modernity, he argues, can be summed up by the obsolescence of fashion, which affirms every present as always passé.

<sup>29</sup> Lipovetsky, *Ibid*: 148.

<sup>30</sup> See Harvie Ferguson (1992) ‘Watching the World Go Round’: 36, and Rodolphe Gasché (1999) *Of Minimal things: Studies in the Notion of Relation*. Stanford.



idea, of which there may be a countless number. Youth. Beauty. Manliness. Athleticism. Sexiness... Desire can never be fulfilled under these conditions, and that is because the want itself is what 'kills' the object, declares it useless, and makes void its positive properties. To throw away is to declare the end not just of usefulness, or the end of 'worth', but the end of *identifying* the item with either the capacity to fulfill some need, or with one's idea of Self. This means that the creation of garbage in modern society is a positive affirmation of an individuated identity, and correspondingly that modernity is inconceivable without an expansion of garbage. As an aspect of our relationship to consumption and disposal, we tend to forget this. Instead, we see garbage in negative terms, almost as if disconnected from the progress we enjoy, as a subjective preoccupation with the transitory, as something that must be resisted because the changes we make are being made faster and lasting for shorter periods of time.

Once again, this speed, this changeability, and the very ephemerality of objects as 'products' of desire can only be explained by the fact that we are so disconnected from the process of the production and disposal of goods. This applies especially to items of clothing, but also generally to any object – food, for example – that might be valued for more than obviously practical reasons, say, as a matter of taste. In short the ephemerality of modern society is summed up by the existence of these multifarious 'fashion' objects, determined by subjective identification, which makes the object world infinite. But the subjective involvement becomes somewhat complicated here, because modern consumption makes it difficult to adhere to categories of 'subject' and 'object.' Thus, as consumers we are at once what intervenes between the beginning and the end of a product, and we provide at the same time the means of both connecting and separating the new and old – but perhaps only in a breath of experience, only immediately. Which is to say that the objects still have an objective determination, as indicated by undeniable realities, such as, functionality, price, and placement with objects sharing similar qualities.<sup>32</sup> In objective terms we correspondingly exemplify the possibility of a disconnection by intervening in the ordering of goods. This is understood in terms of

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<sup>31</sup> See Georges Bataille (1997) 'Chance,' *The Bataille Reader*, Oxford: 37-54.

<sup>32</sup> Of course, this never deterred generations of adaptable consumers from employing pudding bowls as hair trimming accessories, or butter knives as screwdrivers...



the disconnection between the purpose of the object and the wish it fulfills, which of course may have little to do with the ostensible purpose of the object.<sup>33</sup>

A confusion may arise in our understanding of our relationship to the object world because modernity *mediates* our experiences of the object – by advertising and through the rituals of shopping (to name but two out of innumerable possible mediators), but it also permits, in the subjectivity of experience, the removal of mediators. That is to say, modern society allows us to make of an object whatever we will, meaning that conditions allow us to subject *it*, to make it at one with the Self, or to put it another way, to risk identification. Here experience in consumption attains immediacy, and is akin to wagering the self; the possibilities of transformation appear to be infinite.

It is with the idea of the object, the form itself, or even what it represents (and again this may be transitory and unquantifiable), that we have become engaged. The suddenness of experience as the removal of mediation is, in this regard, fundamental. The fact that we can buy food or shoes or a new car all whilst listening to the same canned music, in the same kind of controlled environment, subject to ‘the sales pitch’, removes us several steps from the life-process of the object. Products are delivered up and presented as if by magic – a point underlined by the fact, for example, that the closest most people who eat beef get to a cow these days is eating at McDonalds.

Undoubtedly our experience of the consumer object also reinforces the irony with which we encounter such transactions; we are engaged with the moment, rather than with any supposed essential or useful properties of an object. There is nothing really substantial in this, prior to the staking of cash; it is a frictionless and fleeting fascination. So we buy beefsteaks from Argentina, silk dresses from the East, beer from the Czech Republic, or perhaps a new car made in Germany – and in the background ABBA, from Sweden, sing ‘Dancing Queen.’ This, it seems, constitutes a large part of modern life.

Whilst the stuff that is garbage that is consequent on these transitory desires may remain relatively inconspicuous, our general susceptibility towards the ephemeral, and thus to obsolescence becomes more apparent, indeed it grows unbounded. We expect to consume more new goods, and to replace them at more regular intervals.<sup>34</sup> This is the

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<sup>33</sup> Because as Lipovetsky, *ibid*, tells us, these wishes are multifarious; “Modern fashion diversifies models, solicits differences, and opens up the indeterminate space of choice, preference, or random taste” (81) See especially his introduction to *The Empire of Fashion* and part two.

<sup>34</sup> See Stewart Ewen (1988) *All Consuming Images*, New York: 245. General motors would claim in 1955 that, “our big job is to hasten obsolescence. In 1934 the average car ownership span was 5 years; now it is 2 years. When it



promise of the modern world; life is nothing if not movement and change and fashion is one of the most illuminating realizations of this restlessness.

With the removal of the need of (or of any love for), specific objects, and with their extinction, we remove ourselves from the taint of decay with which they will soon, inevitably be associated, and thus we become removed from the consequences as well. The indifference we show towards the old and used up, and our haste in removing from the Self what we have personally exhausted invites us also to at once 'trash' the idea that we may establish a substantial identity in the very process of destroying these old things, because we are casting off old identities. With so many 'objects' to identify with how can we ever settle for a limit? In what seems like a bygone age of consumerism, major retailers would attempt a universal supply of product lines, in the hope of stimulating a loyalty based on the realization of an ideal; one British retailer sought to provide such a ready identity. 'Man at C&A,' it suggested, was the man who knew his own mind (all retail identification strives to convince us of our individuality), and this would be reflected in the products of C&A. The problem with sustaining such an outmoded idea in an age of obsolescent fashion is that a personality is a limit, a Sort, a name with a class of definable properties. Objects, whilst providing the stuff of our various Sorts also exhaust them, requiring new experiences, new engagements between Self and world, and an ever-expanding vista of possible identities. Desire is never Sorted for long. Garbage, and not such Sorts as the 'man at C&A' is the obvious material product of fleeting identities.

This is motion: casting aside limits, and undoing Sorts, we effortlessly remove the unwanted. Physically, and psychologically it goes *outside*, into a different space, a space of its own outside of self-perception, and out of sight. Now we can easily imagine it invisible, as devoid of meaning; if garbage is considered it is not as the object *as it was* when it was *inside*. Rather, we probably have a wholly negative conception of this *object-becoming-garbage* once it leaves the household, and this negation is evident in how we come to conceptualize such objects; they *lack something*, something to do with value or usefulness; and an additional twist is added in the fact that these objects are *not* our

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is one year, we will have a perfect score." Modern expectations are characterized by qualitative leaps – we want *more*, we want it *better*, and it has to be delivered *faster*.



concern anymore. Eventually they blend into the conceptual background as simply another feature of 'normality' (as long as they remain *outside*, that is).<sup>35</sup>

The ideal consumer may very well consider garbage to be more or less inconsequential. Indeed, this is the significant motive power behind fashion because consumers with memory would seem to be worthless. At best they are collectors, and collecting, as Michel Tournier says, is a reactionary force in the age of fashion. Rubbish, he says, is, to the contrary, the real "storehouse" of objects "multiplied to infinity by mass production." Memory, by looking backwards, tries to deny the multiplicity of obsolescence, whereas the consumption impulse sees that objects are preserved by "means of controlled dumping," although this garbaging is not, he excitedly suggests "without getting my own excitement, before their inhumation, from the repetition of these mass-produced objects, the copies of copies of copies of copies of copies of copies and so on."<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless there are still others for whom garbage represents more than undifferentiated junk. We must not forget that garbage has been 'created' as it lands on the pile of scraps, as a result of its having exhausted some prior capacity, that it 'arrives' at this negation on the back of a loss. In one sense this entails that it can no longer be differentiated in terms of what it *is* (*was*), nor placed within a sensible category. It just becomes (is) junk, or shit, or crap. To the extent that it is noticeable, it is displaced material, no more than that.<sup>37</sup>

That this negation is first a subjective declaration is evidenced by the existence of interested others, who see in our rubbish the possibility of usefulness.<sup>38</sup> Then, placed

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<sup>35</sup> Rathje and Murphy (1992) *Rubbish!*: 45. "Unlike the evidence of many another problem, be it a social one, such as poverty, or an aesthetic one, such as bad architecture, the evidence of specific pieces of household garbage disappears from one day to the next. People put their garbage in the garbage can under the sink, in the bathroom, in the den, and then someone collects it all and *takes it out*. The garbage that is taken out is eventually left at the curb or in the alley, and very soon it is gone. All of this garbage is quickly replaced by other garbage. Garbage passes under our eyes virtually unnoticed, the continual turnover inhibiting perception."

<sup>36</sup> Michel Tournier, quoted in Christof Asendorf (1993) *Batteries of Life*, Berkeley: 49.

<sup>37</sup> See Mary Douglas (1966) *Purity and Danger*, London. Chs.1 and 2, "Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (36).

<sup>38</sup> Mary Douglas, *ibid*, argues that subjective responses only follow from cultural norms. Allowing for some distinction between primitive and modern cultures, she sees dirt in modern cultures to have the status it does because our knowledge of pathogenic organisms and our concern with hygiene and aesthetic order. See chapters 1 & 2. However, garbage as considered here cannot easily be equated with the dirt avoidance that Douglas explores – certainly not in all respects of the 'contingencies' of garbage, which I would argue are not wholly related to hygiene and aesthetic sense. It is arguable that garbage figures somewhat differently in modern society in the sense that it has the potential to raise anxieties over Selfhood, *largely because of the involvement of others* – this is the main thrust of my argument. In contemporary society garbage becomes ambiguous and occupies the space between the inside (self) and the outside (other), when this space, the 'body image' as H. Ferguson (*ibid*: 46) calls it, should, in allowing the development of an individuated identity, protect both subject and object from each other.



outside beyond subjective control, it becomes understood as part of a social category, as garbage, the stuff that large trucks with anonymous men take away. It must then possess some quality that is either unseen or ignored in the act of producing it, which means that the garbage creator, the consumer, does not see the still-to-be-exhausted potential, as seen for instance by another observer. As far as this is the case, it would suggest that as we consume we have little idea of *potentiality* in the object that extends beyond the satisfaction of our needs; in other words, we are blinded by the fact that we subjectively determine the properties of the object in the consummation of desire. But once the limits the consumer unwittingly places on the object are 'removed,' the finite and temporal nature of the object is also destroyed, and so the contingency of garbage may have several beneficial effects, especially for an enterprising muckraker.

Surprisingly (or not) these fringe benefits are most often, in recent times, financial or political – although the use to which garbage is put is of secondary interest here. What is important is that no matter how varied the intention of a muckraker, the threat posed is real, and it is a particularly modern kind of threat: it is the idea that we control our lives, that we banish the past in a positive statement of self-determination that is somehow compromised by the very fact of our garbage. We placed it *out* – but someone else, in the act of appropriation, tries to bring it back *in*, to give it another meaning, or a new identity or, in other words, to tell a different story.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Or, we removed any vestige of meaning or significance in the object, but someone else attempts to negate this act. If nothing else, this is chance at work.



## 14 Muckrakers

here is the gateway to the beginning, here the portal/  
of renewing change, the birdshit, even, melding/  
enrichingly in with debris

A.R. AMMONS, *Garbage*

Until relatively recently the perception of the muckraker had not changed much from the sense of ‘scavenging,’ ‘foraging,’ or ‘ragpicking.’ This sense of the term originates in John Bunyan’s 17<sup>th</sup> century tale *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, in which the “man with the Muck-rake” is presented as an emblem of absorption in earthly pursuits.<sup>1</sup> However by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century this had come to mean something quite different, to refer to persons who “fished around in troubled waters,” suggesting that there was some value in private discrepancies, or put another way, there is value in the disorder that results from a failure to maintain order over one’s life and private affairs. And it was in 1910, according to the *OED*, the verb ‘to muck-rake’ was first utilised to refer to the practice of subjecting powerful persons or institutions to allegations of corruption or other illegal or scandalous behaviour.

More recently, however, this term (‘muckraker’) might also take in a number of participants who were specifically interested in various kinds of Sorting: individuals and institutions that were engaged in specific and obvious projects of identification and objectivity. And so, from ‘garbology’ to espionage, not to mention the spread of all manner of muckraking between, sometime around the period after the Second World War, people in modern societies began gradually developing a consciousness of the non-material properties of discarded objects, and that the rubbish this constituted might actually reveal another ‘truth’ about how things really were. This gradual awareness of

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<sup>1</sup> *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, 1900: 11. See also Susan Strasser (1999) *Waste and Want*, New York, for an historical depiction of scavengers, ragpickers, and dumpster divers.



previously hidden properties in garbage items is also contemporaneous with the expansion of commodity production and consumption, and in that regard with a significant increase in the leftovers of such obvious material progress. It also relates in a separate but similar way to the bureaucratization of knowledge, which is to say an increase in paper waste created by bureaucratic, rational institutions.

In other words there would be no garbologists, no need for paper shredders and such similar devices unless we infer on the part of these modern muckrakers an implicit awareness of order being merely the mask of disorder. Unsurprisingly, then, such an awareness itself points to a looming disorientation of Sorts, a blurring of the distinction between the world as we take it to be, and the world as others see us in it, or as it actually is if that indeed can be determined. In short, garbage, beginning some time in the early to mid-twentieth century, provides a means of recasting understandings of the relation of Subject to Object in modern society.

For the self-styled 'official' garbologists, the researchers at the Garbage Project, established at the University of Arizona in the 1970's, the idea was to apply archaeological method to the investigation of all kinds of physical rubbish. This meant the material remains of previously valued objects that had been either dug up from landfill sites, or sifted from garbage mountains. The intention was thus to look at human life (at consumption, in other words) from what they refer to as 'the back end.'<sup>2</sup> The metaphor is apt, for garbage, like shit, is identifiably the product at some point before it is placed outside of a particular subject, and so what goes in the 'front end,' the determinate object, must ultimately emerge, transformed into matter of another form, from this back end, and of course, we infer that what usually emerges from this 'back end' will ultimately go unseen precisely because it has now been stripped of its determinate qualities.

Singular amongst the various (and loosely defined) muckrakers who see some kind of value in garbage, the garbologists are distinguished by their adherence to scientific principles. They are not merely muckrakers; they have a plan and a purpose and they use methods of prediction both in locating 'data' and in suggesting the ways in which this

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<sup>2</sup> Rathje and Murphy (1992) *Rubbish!* Ch.1. The term being a tacit recognition that no matter ever disappears, but only changes its form.



data becomes representative of something else, of general consumptive behaviour, for example.<sup>3</sup>

Their location within the academic tradition undoubtedly directs their research towards standard scientific practices of sorting and labeling, of quantifying and categorizing, and very much places the Garbage Project within an identifiable western tradition of rational analysis. In doing so, however, the archaeological approach utilised here overlooks one of the most interesting aspects of garbage – that it threatens our capacity to keep the *inside* apart from the *outside*; to maintain an individuated identity. This is something, this capacity for individuation, that happens, if you like, ‘on the surface’ of life, meaning that it is the garbage that remains unburied or unsorted that is the main threat to Self; it is a matter of immediate past and present threatening to come into collision, but by digging deep in landfills for garbage the archaeologist is forced into a less particular analysis of garbage. Undoubtedly a generalized scientific method, such as the conversion of garbage into ‘analyzable’ data, demands this, although it unfortunately also glosses over the fact that there is no collective ‘back end,’ and to suggest there is would be to lose sight of the origin and once personal properties of what becomes our garbage. Once the garbage is scientifically ordered it loses some, although not all, of its power to challenge ideas of Self.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that the Garbage Project has developed alternative methods of looking at, and so understanding modern consumption means that they do return garbage back to the Inside, and thus hold up our self perceptions to scrutiny, revealing, if we permit, a glimpse of the fragility of autonomous self-creation found through consumption. Although the identification of consumables, we need to remember, does not approximate to an identity with a specific consumer, but is rather productive of general trends of consumption.

So, although these results illustrate generalities and do not, strictly speaking, explore Subject-Object relations, they do say something about the ease with which a rational re-Sorting of ‘data’ can objectify a world. Unsurprisingly they have found that we

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<sup>3</sup> See Rathje and Murphy, *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Again see Rathje and Murphy, *ibid.*, ch.1. “A unique database has been built up from these cast offs, covering virtually every aspect of American Life: drinking habits, attitudes toward red meat, trends in the use of convenience foods, the strange ways in which consumers respond to shortages, the use of contraceptives, and hundreds of other matters.” And later, “it is *almost always the case that a given person’s garbage is at once largely anonymous and unimaginably humdrum.* Garbage most fully comes alive when it can be viewed in the context of broad patterns, for it is mainly in patterns that the links between artifacts and behaviours can be discerned.” (My italics)



overwhelmingly lie about consumption, especially about what we eat and drink, and suggest that garbage can catch us out. Not only does garbage not 'lie', it tells a different story to the one we tell to ourselves. As matter divested of subjectively attached value, garbage just *is*, and in this sense the Garbage Project's evidence makes interesting reading. One table from the Garbage Project's findings can demonstrate this very well. Ostensibly it provides a comparison of items recovered from garbage with reported levels of consumption over a variety of consumer goods. Another way of looking at this is with the idea of the individuated subject in mind. In this sense we can now see two stories – the one memory tells Self (under reported), and the one garbage tells the Other (over reported).

UNDER REPORTED (%)		OVER REPORTED (%)	
Sugar	94	Cottage. Cheese	311
Chips/Popcorn	81	Liver	200
Candy	80	Tuna	184
Bacon	80	Vegetable. Soup	94
Ice Cream	63	Corn Bread	72
Ham/lunch meats	57	Skim milk	57
Sausage	56	High-fiber cereal	55

Source: Rathje and Murphy (1992) *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage*, New York.

This is basically an unwelcome reminder in the face of our tendency to forget the past. The faltering memory illustrated in the over reporting of healthy foodstuffs perhaps just demonstrates a mild confusion over the difference between what we want to be (or feel we should be), and what we are? Those things that are objectively determined to be 'bad' for us – sugar and candy, ice cream – are conveniently banished from memory; when desire kicks in to be followed by a *rush* to indulge, the slowness of movement required to Sort such intake obviously cannot be accommodated, and thus given the passage of time memory perhaps finds it easy to confuse cottage cheese and ice cream. Cottage cheese, and such 'healthy' products, being the outcome of deliberative consumption, are undeniably easier to Sort, especially since these are often weighed and measured anyway, 'as part of a calorie-controlled diet,' as the well-known saying would have it. Ice cream, on the other hand may be less deliberately and more compulsively purchased.

The Arizona garbologists also found that other unhealthy items, like alcohol, were significantly underreported. Apart from the fact that alcohol is not particularly conducive to rational calculations, we might also suggest that the data reveals that people in modern society like to keep the private and the public apart, and thus to a significant



## GARBAGE ITEM CODE LIST

The Garbage Project  
University of Arizona

BEEF*	001	NON-DAIRY CREAMERS & WHIPS	065	ROLLING PAPERS (also smoking items)	128
OTHER MEAT (not bacon)*	002	HEALTH FOODS*	066	HOUSEHOLD & LAUNDRY CLEANERS*	131
CHICKEN	003	SLOPS*	069	HOUSEHOLD CLEANING TOOLS (not detergents)	132
OTHER POULTRY	004	REGULAR COFFEE (instant or ground)*	070	HOUSEHOLD MAINT. ITEMS (paint, wood, etc.)	133
FISH (fresh, frozen, canned, dried)*	005	DECAF COFFEE	071	COOKING & SERVING AIDS	134
CRUSTACEANS & MOLLUSKS (shrimp, clams, etc.)	006	EXOTIC COFFEE*	072	TISSUE CONTAINER	135
T.V.P. TYPE FOODS*	007	TEA*	073	TOILET PAPER CONTAINER	136
UNKNOWN MEAT	008	CHOCOLATE DRINK MIX OR TOPPING	074	NAPKIN CONTAINER	137
CHEESE (including cottage cheese)	010	FRUIT OR VEG JUICE (canned or bottled)	075	PAPER TOWEL CONTAINER	138
MILK*	011	FRUIT JUICE CONCENTRATE	076	PLASTIC WRAP CONTAINER	139
ICE CREAM (also ice milk, sherbet)*	012	FRUIT DRINK, pdr or lqud (Tang, Koolaid, Hi-C)*	077	BAGS (paper or plastic)*	140
OTHER DAIRY (not butter)	013	DIET SODA	078	BAG CONTAINER	141
EGGS (regular, powdered, liquid)*	014	REGULAR SODA	079	ALUMINUM FOIL SHEETS	142
BEANS (not green beans)*	015	COCKTAIL MIX (carbonated)	080	ALUMINUM FOIL PACKAGE	143
NUTS	016	COCKTAIL MIX (non-carb. liquid)	081	WAX PAPER PACKAGE	144
PEANUT BUTTER	017	COCKTAIL MIX (powdered)	082	MECHANICAL APPLIANCE (tools)	147
FATS: Saturated*	018	PREMIXED COCKTAILS (alcoholic)	083	ELECTRICAL APPLIANCE AND ITEMS	148
Unsaturated*	019	SPIRITS (booze)	084	AUTO SUPPLIES	149
Bacon, salt pork*	020	WINE (still & sparkling)	085	FURNITURE	150
Meat trimming	021	BEER*	086	CLOTHING: CHILD*	151
CORN (also corn meal and masa)*	022	BABY FOOD & JUICE*	087	ADULT*	152
FLOUR (also pancake mix)*	023	BABY CEREAL (pablum)	088	CLOTHING CARE ITEMS (shoe polish, thread)	153
RICE*	024	BABY FORMULA (liquid)*	089	DRY CLEANING (laundry also)	154
OTHER GRAIN (barley, wheat germ, etc.)	025	BABY FORMULA (powdered)*	090	PET MAINTENANCE (litter)	155
NOODLES (pasta)	026	PET FOOD (dry)	091	PET TOYS	156
WHITE BREAD	027	PET FOOD (canned or moist)	092	GATE RECEIPTS (tickets)	157
DARK BREAD	028	TV DINNERS (also pot pies)	094	HOBBY RELATED ITEMS	158
TORTILLAS*	029	TAKE OUT MEALS	095	PHOTO SUPPLIES	159
DRY CEREALS: Regular	030	SOUPS*	096	HOLIDAY VALUE (non-food)*	160
High Sugar (first ingredient only)	031	GRAVY & SPECIALTY SAUCES*	097	DECORATIONS (non holiday)	161
COOKED CEREALS (instant or regular)	032	PREPARED MEALS (canned or packaged)*	098	PLANT AND YARD MAINT	162
CRACKERS	033	VITAMIN PILLS AND SUPPLEMENTS (commercial)*	100	STATIONERY SUPPLIES	163
CHIPS (also pretzels)	034	PRESCRIBED DRUGS (prescribed vitamins)	101	JEWELRY	164
UNKNOWN PRODUCE*	040	ASPIRIN*	102	CHILD SCHOOL RELATED PAPERS*	171
FRESH VEGETABLES*	041	COMMERCIAL STIMULANTS AND DEPRESSANTS*	103	CHILD EDUC. BOOKS (non-fiction)	172
CANNED VEGETABLES (dehydrated also)*	042	COMMERCIAL REMEDIES*	104	CHILD EDUC. GAMES (toys)	173
FROZEN VEGETABLES*	043	ILLICIT DRUGS*	105	CHILD AMUSEMENT READING	174
POTATO PEEL*	044	COMMERCIAL DRUG PARAPHENALIA	106	CHILD AMUSEMENT TOYS (games)	175
FRESH FRUIT*	045	ILLICIT DRUG PARAPHENALIA	107	ADULT BOOKS (non-fiction)	176
CANNED FRUIT (dehydrated also)*	046	CONTRACEPTIVES: MALE	108	ADULT BOOKS (fiction)	177
FROZEN FRUIT*	047	FEMALE	109	ADULT AMUSEMENT GAMES	178
FRUIT PEEL*	048	BABY SUPPLIES (diapers, etc.)*	111	LOCAL NEWSPAPERS*	181
RELISH, PICKLES, OLIVES*	049	INJURY ORIENTED (iodine, bandaids, etc.)	112	NEWSPAPERS (other city, national)*	182
SYRUP, HONEY, JELLIES, MOLASSES	051	PERSONAL SANITATION*	113	ORGANIZATIONAL NEWSPAPERS OR MAGAZINES (also religion)*	183
PASTRIES (cookies, cakes and mix, pies, etc.)*	052	COSMETICS*	114	GENERAL INTEREST MAGAZINES*	184
SUGAR*	053	CIGARETTES (butts)	123	SPECIAL INTEREST MAGAZINE OR NEWSPAPER*	185
ARTIFICIAL SWEETENERS	054	CIGARETTES (pack)*	124	ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE (TV Guide, etc.)	186
CANDY*	055	CIGARETTES (carton)*	125	MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS (specify on back of sheet)*	190
SALT*	056	CIGARS	126		
SPICES & FLAVORINGS (catsup, mustard, pepper, etc.)*	057	PIPE, CHEWING TOBACCO, LOOSE TOBACCO	127		
BAKING ADDITIVES (yeast, baking powder, etc.)	058				
POPSICLES	060				
PUDDING	061				
GELATIN	062				
INSTANT BREAKFAST	063				
DIPS (for chips)	064				

\* See Special Notes

PLATE 31. GARBAGE ITEM CODE LIST. This list was employed by researchers at the University of Arizona's Garbage Project in order to identify items found at, for example, garbage tips and landfills. The impulse to *sort* — as seen in the high degree of differentiation involved here — effectively brings garbage 'back to life.' This sorting overlooks one important aspect of garbage that tells us why garbage is so undesirable — as garbage these kind of items have moved out of a cognitive 'sphere' of differentiation which previously attached a value them. Garbage is undifferentiated matter; it is *nothing*. Sorting by means of such a typology confers identity on these items. See William Rathje and Cullen Murphy, 1992, *Rubbish! The Archeology of Garbage*, p. 22.



extent will undersell the self to the outside world. In this sense garbage ultimately gives the lie to our failing powers of selfhood, and indicates that garbage, in fact, makes the subject transparent.

Employing a 'Garbage Item Code List,' consisting of 190 ways of sorting garbage, ostensibly to "transform raw garbage into data" the garbologists reveal the basis of their particular Sorting, and thus how they manage to objectify this particular aspect of 'reality' (Plate 31).<sup>5</sup> This method also produces other interesting means of sorting garbage, including an extensive "pull-tab typology" for distinguishing the brand of ring-pull once separated from its parent can, and also a map of the spatial distribution of garbage in public places, which allows them to suggest the probable location of various kinds of garbage ranging from broken glass to clothes and sexual objects.<sup>6</sup> For example, discarded sexual objects and paraphernalia are rarely uncovered in household waste, but are by contrast frequently found in public garbage cans.

Although the veracity of such data might seem questionable (it depends on a measure of consistency in disposal routines), the ingenuity of method undoubtedly provides an interesting alternative to conventional consumption data. The project unwittingly reveals the importance of chance in this particular sorting of the world, but having said that, it would be rash to suggest their findings are any less relevant than other sciences, particularly archeology and history, both of which it combines, simply on the basis of methodological difficulties that are common to other disciplines.

Garbologists believe that we can take municipal waste management to provide the best means of accurately tracking consumption patterns.<sup>7</sup> In the case of landfill waste, which from the point of view of considering the environmental impact of garbage, happens to be the kind of garbage that most interests the garbage archaeologist, and that provides the most contentious findings, the indestructibility of garbage presents itself as nothing less than a gift to posterity. In fact a landfill is a perfect place for an *archaeologist* to look, because our contemporary practice of burying garbage to guard against its contaminating powers preserves these remnants of disposed value as 'evidence' much in the same way that conventional archaeological evidence is preserved.

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<sup>5</sup> Rathje and Murphy, *ibid*: 22.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*: 57

<sup>7</sup> According to the authors, as of 1991, the volume of garbage sorted by researchers employed by the Garbage Project was equivalent to 1766 cubic yards, enough to create a pyramid of 56 square feet and 45 feet high. "The majority of this was garbage fresh from the truck, rather than landfill sorts." (15)



Landfill dumping is thus rather like the ancient Egyptian practice of burying the dead in a manner designed to preserve the physical body from decomposition; the one major difference in this case being that this is not what is normally, nor obviously, intended by burying our waste in holes in the ground. The durability of garbage also stands in contradiction to the claims of producers of 'environmentally friendly' products; products that are supposedly designed to decompose in landfills, but on the evidence of garbologists, probably do not. The Garbage Project suggests that in separating and excluding garbage in this way, we actually ensure its durability. In other words, what landfill sites do is create time capsules.<sup>8</sup>

In order to prevent the contamination of surrounding land by seepage, the landfill is actually sealed off from biologically degenerative processes, and thus prevents the full decomposition of matter. In other words the scientific study of garbage only confirms that no matter ever really goes away, it is simply put aside out of view, and by such means entombed and preserved.<sup>9</sup> But whilst revealing what our breakfast habits were in 1972 may be of legitimate scientific, and social, interest, and it may reveal something hitherto unknown about consumption patterns, it does not really expand our understanding of garbage in modern society beyond provoking a rethinking of the ways in which we understand material consumption and the categorization of waste.<sup>10</sup>

My point of divergence from the concerns of the garbologists lies not in a disagreement of their findings, or in what they do generally, but simply in a different view of the significance of garbage; that is to say, in an understanding of garbage as a mediator of Subject-Object relations in modern consumer society. On the other hand, the Garbage Project's view of waste is generated from an interest in what the garbage once was, meaning amongst other things that if the matter dug up during excavation work is too 'deformed' it cannot then be *identified* as the product it once was, and

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<sup>8</sup> Rathje and Murphy, *ibid*, describe New York's *Fresh Kills* landfill (one of the largest in the world) as "a treasure trove – a Pompeii, a Tikal, A Valley of the Kings" full of "wonderful things." Chapter 1. In chapter three the authors also tackle the "myth" of landfill biodegradation, suggesting that contrary to received opinion, not much of it goes on in these sites. Project excavations turned up items, for example, that were "thirty years old – sometimes even older," that is to say, as old as the landfills (113). Whilst for some 'organic material' (foodstuffs, etc.) biodegradation goes on for a little while, it eventually slows to "a virtual standstill. For other kinds [of object] biodegradation never really gets under way at all. Well-designed and managed landfills seem to be far more apt to preserve their contents for posterity than to transform them into humus or mulch. They are not vast composters; rather they are vast mummifiers." (112)

<sup>9</sup> Waste that is dispatched to landfill sites is buried in deep, plastic lined cavities. Each daily layer of garbage is compacted then covered with soil to fend off birds, rodents, or other scavengers. Thus it continues until the hole is filled. This produces layers of waste, which are much like soil and rock formations, according to Rathje and Murphy. That is to say the garbage can be identified as coming from a specific time frame.



therefore it cannot make the transition, as they put it 'from raw garbage to data.' The archeological, or scientific impulse is to identify products themselves, product packaging, dates on buried newspapers, and to try and suggest what that tells us about the other garbage that can be found within the same part of the landfill.

In the midst of all of this scientific ordering what is excluded as a matter of the process is the idea that garbage is no longer this at all, no longer a specific product, that it has become 'garbage' because it is no longer *differentiated* (as a product or any object must of necessity be), no longer categorically definable, and has departed from our rational attempts at ordering. So, garbage is in this view (which stands in contradiction to the Garbage Project) nothing. It is simply matter negated, devoid of once identifiable properties, and in virtue of this it just *is* garbage and nothing else. What is intriguing about objects, therefore, is their eventual transvaluation, the fact that something ends up as 'nothing.' It is that, and also our relationship to the world of objects, to our role in their transvaluation, and how we understand a world thus 'created' that takes us closer to revealing the contingency of identification with the object world. Just what any given object used to be, once discarded, is in this regard of no importance. All that matters is that what was once *something* has become *nothing*. Although, this should not leave aside an equally important fact, and that is that the object only becomes nothing to the one who has discarded it. Chance creeps unnoticed into the consumption-disposal cycle, in that the cast-offs we so easily forget may still be of some worth.

In a more general sense, muckraking as the indiscriminate foraging and retrieval of indeterminate matter, realizes the contingent territory that opens before us as a result of the indestructibility of once beloved but now trashed objects. In terms of uncovering the unknown possibilities 'attached' to garbage there is the slightly shadowy figure of the non-scientific garbage sorter, and more so than the academic endeavours of the Arizona archaeologists, it is the renegade figure of this modern day muckraker, who, it transpires, by very much understanding the personal, subjective qualities of garbage, assumes a greater significance by operating on what turns out to be the shifting ground between the subject and the object world.

This figure, from the journalistic muckrakers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (who first earned the dubious epithet) to the present-day celebrity dumpster divers, succeeds in

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<sup>10</sup> This is not at all to denigrate this approach. On the contrary I suggest that it shows another aspect of our



getting closer to underlining the importance of objects and garbage to a sense of Self in modern society. What becomes threatening in such activities is that whilst we may, on the one hand, accept that scientists could have a legitimate interest in garbage, it does not prevent the formation of an idea, on the other, that messing about in other people's garbage is somehow abnormal.

In common with the archaeologists of the Garbage Project, the modern-day freelance muckraker shares some important beliefs, and among these would be the view that ultimately we are our garbage, and also that garbage, far from being spent presents some kind of possible alternative explanation of an accepted state of affairs and does not signify, as the verb 'to consume' suggests, the exhaustion of possibility. The manner in which a mere muckraker can actually intervene in the life of others simply by paying attention to what is commonly forgotten, can have devastating consequences.<sup>11</sup> It is axiomatic that we live in an age characterised by daily transactions of one sort or another, in social relations of work and consumption, and therefore we live by through the daily mediation of experience, in these relations, which subsist between more or less anonymous parties.<sup>12</sup>

On the one hand, in terms of commodity production, this gives birth to what Marx recognised to be alienation from man's 'species being,' a disconnection consequent upon the transfer of human 'qualities' into the discretely produced object as commodity. Equally so, it seems that what we consume, also being mediated by formal and objective structures (from the high street shop, to the checkout queue to the menu in a restaurant) might be viewed as the flipside of the producer's alienation, and undeniably helps to discriminate the precise forms of our consumption, and in the process, we might suggest, placing limits on it. Thus, as consumers of objects we are actually objectified personally, in both satisfaction (self-creation) and disappointment ('alienation'), it seems.<sup>13</sup>

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consumer society.

<sup>11</sup> Recently in the U.K., a gentleman known as Benjy 'the Binman' Pell has achieved notoriety for his alleged involvement in a number of scandals that have rocked the British government, and other well-known public figures, such as Mohammed al-Fayed. Al-Fayed, for example, was accused by lawyers representing a former Conservative government minister in a libel case (the former M.P. for Tatton, Neil Hamilton) of engaging Pell to find incriminating documents that would support his case. See *The Observer*, 10 December 2000.

<sup>12</sup> See Christof Asendorf (1993) *Batteries of Life*, Berkeley. In discussing Marx's explanation of commodity circulation he observes that "while the goods [in exchange] are indeed active within social relations as if they were living, living social relations transform themselves into petrified, objective relations." (36)

<sup>13</sup> See Karl Marx (1975) *Early Writings*, Harmondsworth. In the 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts' Marx explains it thus: "The externalization of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an



On this basis it is not too difficult to think that perhaps just as we do 'pick up' little bits of the world we like and then symbolically 'integrate' them as part of the Self, we also undoubtedly must leave little bits of ourselves all over the place, the bits we don't like anymore. These 'leavings' may be difficult to grasp as substantial 'things,' in the way that we can grasp the reality of the physical objects we discard, and may even be insubstantial 'things'; perhaps 'objects' we give the world through language, those 'hostages to fortune' that are so calamitous for politicians, for example. A stray comment here, an ill-considered opinion ('a load of rubbish' perhaps), or a minor indiscretion.

But like physical material such linguistic detritus become objects because they are placed out into the open, and once in the open can take on a life independent of a previous determination, with the help of others, open to a multitude of interpretations. So, just as a muckraker may re-arrange your life from disparate fragments you have now left behind, language in all its forms too assumes multifarious forms in the hands of the wrong people. As modern society becomes more complex, and forces people into an ever-increasing number of relations (reliant on vast amounts of information which takes the form of a Sorting of language and knowledge), the production of useful goods and

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object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life that which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien." (324) One example of consumer 'alienation,' is illustrated to hilarious effect in Bob Rafelson's 1970 film *Five Easy Pieces*, in which the character of Bobby Dupea (Jack Nicholson) makes a failed attempt to order his preferred breakfast, which includes some wheat toast:

*Dupea:* I'd like a plain omelette, no potatoes, tomatoes instead, a cup of coffee, and wheat toast.

*Waitress:* (She points to the menu) No substitutions.

*Dupea:* What do you mean? You don't have any tomatoes?

*Waitress:* *Only* what's on the menu. You can have a number two - a plain omelette. It comes with cottage fries and rolls.

*Dupea:* Yeah, I know what it comes with. But it's not what I want.

*Waitress:* Well, I'll come back when you make up your mind.

*Dupea:* Wait a minute. I have made up my mind. I'd like a plain omelette, no potatoes on the plate, a cup of coffee, and a side order of wheat toast.

*Waitress:* I'm sorry, we don't have any side orders of toast...an English muffin or a coffee roll.

*Dupea:* What do you mean you don't make side orders of toast? You make sandwiches, don't you?

*Waitress:* Would you like to talk to the manager?

*Dupea:* ...You've got bread and a toaster of some kind?

*Waitress:* I don't make the rules.

*Dupea:* OK, I'll make it as easy for you as I can. I'd like an omelette, plain, and a chicken salad sandwich on wheat toast, no mayonnaise, no butter, no lettuce. And a cup of coffee.

*Waitress:* A number two, chicken sal san, hold the butter, the lettuce and the mayonnaise. And a cup of coffee. Anything else?

*Dupea:* Yeah. Now all you have to do is hold the chicken, bring me the toast, give me a check for the chicken salad sandwich, and you haven't broken any rules.

*Waitress* (spitefully): You want me to *hold* the chicken, huh?

*Dupea:* I want you to hold it between your knees.

*Waitress* (turning and telling him to look at the sign that says, "No Substitutions") Do you see that sign, sir? Yes, you'll all have to leave. I'm not taking any more of your smartness and sarcasm.

*Dupea:* You see this sign? (He sweeps all the water glasses and menus off the table.)



## THERE'S AN ALLEGHENY SHREDDER TO MEET YOUR NEEDS

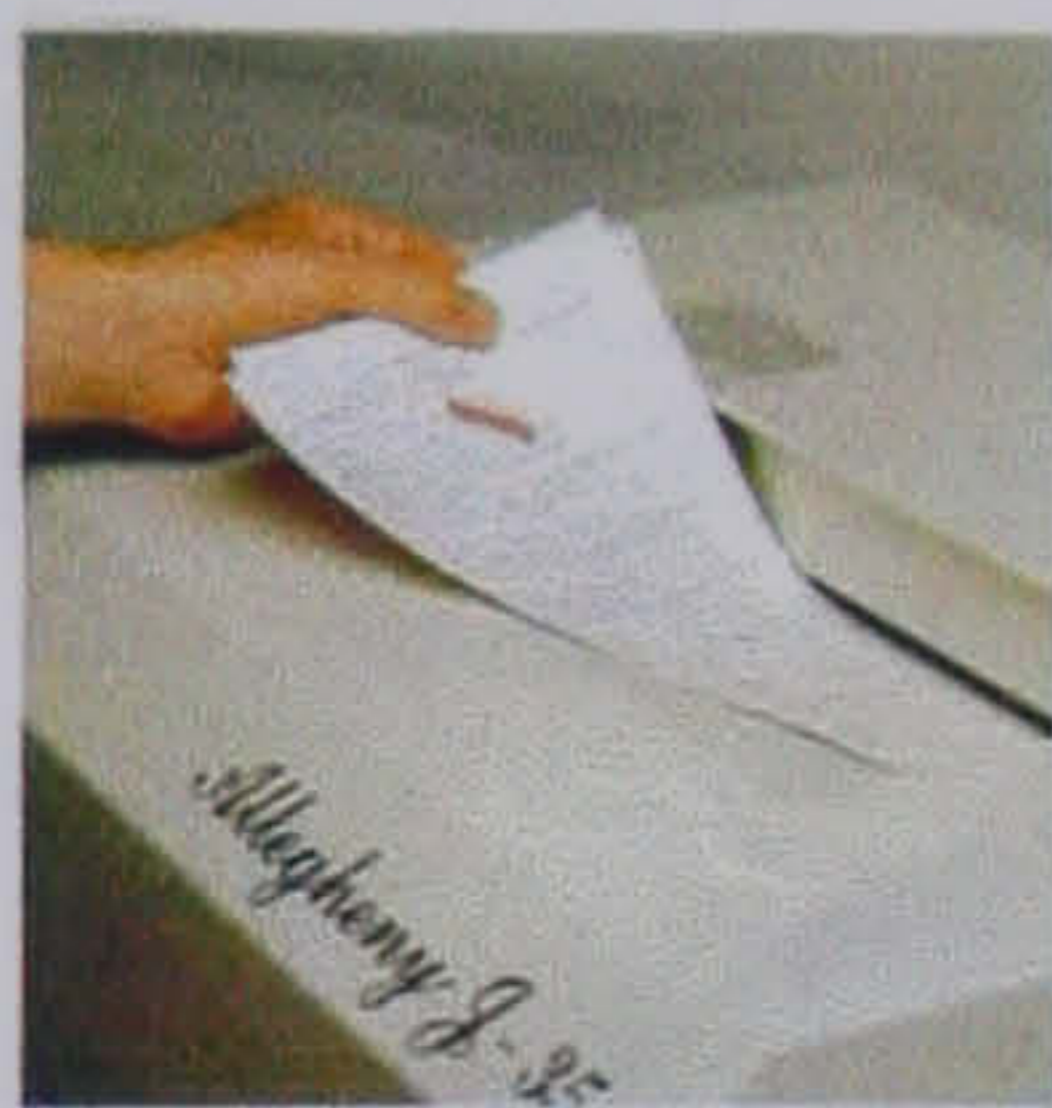
In today's competitive business world, your company's most valuable asset is information—in the form of financial records, personnel files, payroll data, customer lists, contracts, marketing plans, computer disks, etc. Most companies protect their information during



its active and storage phases. However, when this information is no longer required, it is often discarded carelessly.

The problem is that if your company's information were to fall into the wrong hands, the result could be anything from embarrassment to catastrophic loss of revenue.

Simply "throwing things away" cannot possibly provide the security you need. Wastebaskets and trash bins are easy to search, and crumpled papers are easy to read. With the recent emergence of "dumpster diving," rifling through trash is an easy way for anyone to obtain your company's confidential information.



**Shredding is the most reliable way to keep your unwanted and obsolete records from being read by the wrong people.**

Today, thousands of banks, insurance companies, hospitals, government agencies, and other organizations—including the majority of the Fortune 1000—rely on Allegheny paper shredders for cost-effective destruction of their confidential materials.

Allegheny offers the widest range of paper shredders available—from office models to high volume shredding systems that can destroy up to 10 tons of paper per hour.

As the industry leader, Allegheny offers more than just equipment. We offer solutions. We can assist you in setting up a complete document destruction program—developing the most efficient means of collecting your confidential materials, processing them through the shredding system, and recycling the shredded paper for a profit.

PLATE 32. THERE'S AN ALLEGHENY SHREDDER TO MEET YOUR NEEDS. This is one side of an information leaflet that extols the virtues of the shredding equipment manufactured by the Allegheny Company. In recognition of the value of discarded objects to others the shredder is now perceived to be one of the primary tools in the battle against the misuse of information, or the presentation of some presumed identity on the basis of the discarded objects of an individual or company, and so on. Another counter espionage organization (Spybusters.com) reveals that 'dumpster diving' is now the number one method of economic espionage, and that, for example, the Supreme Court of the United States of America has effectively 'legalized' this activity, declaring that there is no expectation of privacy, or ownership, once an item has been left for garbage pick up.



is accompanied by an inherent danger: if information is valuable, then how do we dispose of that? And so, such problems create a need for ever-more cunning technologies for 'de-materializing' the leavings that could be *reSorted* by an external determination.

That there is a hidden potential in the paper waste of modern society can be seen in the existence of the paper shredder, one more device for maintaining the mask of games that becomes the edifice of modernity. In Don DeLillo's novel *Underworld*, a story that explores the fluidity of appearances, there is, on display at a waste industry convention, a "confidential shredder called the Watergate." Signalling both the need to retain and then elaborate the mask on the surface: the name 'Watergate' is itself redolent of modern indiscretions, if not Machiavellian depths the device will conceal. In fact, one real corporate waste company suggests "shredding is the way from keeping your unwanted and obsolete records from being read by the wrong people." (Plate 32) And yet another that "scraps of seemingly useless information [can be] synergistically related" and thus the company's own 'cross-cut' shredding machinery is the best way of reducing the availability of "these puzzle parts." to the muckraker<sup>14</sup>

On the surface, however, a puzzle may be declared as a need for detection. Mark C. Taylor employs this metaphor in suggesting that the world only appears to be a depth-supporting surface. It is actually just another surface that conceals infinite layers below. The skin of the world (the mask of games) thus conceals by its own surface appearance. Or as Taylor says, the world is "hides hiding...if depth is but another surface, nothing is profound...This does not mean everything is superficial; to the contrary, in the absence of depth everything becomes endlessly complex."<sup>15</sup> To judge by our increasing sensitivity to disposal, the implication is that the Self is no longer indissoluble in the modern world, it can no longer represent the concordance of the subject with objective determinations, and thus garbage is a necessary byproduct arising from the fact that *others* become increasingly involved in our daily lives. Others create the conditions under which we may become objectified. This is the possibility the muckraker sees in garbage.<sup>16</sup>

The most prominent public muckraker of recent times, and self-declared founder of "non-governmental garbology" was the American, A.J. Weberman, who first developed

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<sup>14</sup> Murray Associates, Counter Espionage Consultants. Found at [www.spybusters.com](http://www.spybusters.com).

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, *Ibid*: 18.



an interest in the garbage of well-known public figures in the 1960's.<sup>17</sup> The fact that he makes a point of emphasizing his distance from authority, and thus establishing an anti-establishment status is just another way of saying what may be less obvious about muckraking, and that is that government secret services are also to be found down amongst the trash. The director of the FBI at the time, Edgar J. Hoover, had authorized muckraking of his own, or what were then known as 'trash covers,' a practice more commonly known in espionage circles as 'trashing' or 'dumpster diving.' Much like the errant muckraker Weberman, it wasn't any old rubbish the government men were interested in, and in contrast to the garbage archaeologist who was after a snapshot of the general tendencies of the American consumer, both the 'official' and renegade muckrakers were concerned with obtaining a particular kind of 'dirt' on known targets, that is to say with the leftovers that were to be used as material either to compromise or smear individuals.

For his part A.J. Weberman claims to have started with the innocuous idea that by scanning the garbage of his idol, Bob Dylan, he might be able to understand the singer's increasingly surreal songs and the detached public persona he had assumed in contrast to his prior involvement with the more literal and obvious intentions of the consciousness-raising activities of the 'folk movement.' This ended up, however, with Weberman forming a belief that Dylan had actually in this transformation betrayed his public, and that the Bob Dylan public persona was not the same as the private family man, the rather normal husband and father that stood in contrast to the public perception of an anti-establishment rebel. Weberman was therefore motivated by some kind of partially expressed anxiety over the exact identity of this person, and that maybe the singer had not only assumed a different name to that given at birth but also a different persona, that he was in fact an act in many senses (and not only as a performer), and in fact a phony of some sort.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This state of affairs is realised also in the way government agencies, insurance firms, consumer credit agencies, and so on, collate 'information' based predominantly on consumption to provide an objective picture of who we are.

<sup>17</sup> Weberman claims to have invented the term 'garbology,' although this is strictly applied to the methodology devised by William Rathje and Cullen Murphy. The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that dustmen in the 1960's were the first to use this term, describing themselves, in some cases, as garbologists.

<sup>18</sup> A.J. Weberman (1980) *My Life in Garbology*, New York. For example, "In 1971 I'd started the Dylan Liberation Front (D.L.F.). Its purpose was to remind Dylan about his failure to contribute money or energy to anti-war and civil rights organizations, and his lack of support for political prisoners despite the fact that he'd built his career singing songs about their struggles. Many others, along with myself, were concerned about his refusal at that time to perform at political benefit concerts, the lack of social commitment in his song lyrics and the fact that he owned stock in companies that produced weapons used in Vietnam." Chapter one.



Tired of people trying to attach great significance to his work, Dylan had himself at the time withdrawn from any engagement with an audience that was keen to have him as a spokesman for an alternative culture (an audience consisting of possessive 'fans' like Weberman). This kind of objectification was summed up by his audience's unwillingness to grant him artistic licence, going so far as to present him with petitions suggestion he return to 'folk' music, and the concerns of the folk movement. By attempting to 'own' him in this way, to determine his identity, they were also denying that he could be the creation of an autonomous process. Aware that such a role may bind his creative instincts, his 'nonsensical' lyrics and Delphic utterances of the time were one obvious strategy to escape the objectification of those who sought deep meaning in his words, limiting his identity to that of 'protest singer.'<sup>19</sup> At the same time little could he know that his trash could provide the meaning-seekers an alternative means of objectifying him. This unwelcome interest in his garbage was just another trap contingent, not only upon celebrity status, but also on his success in making such a vital connection with people.

The realization that there was potentially a way *inside* and that garbage could be a route to some idea that there was a more objective 'truth' about the Self was also the birth of a larger public interest, at this time, in the private lives of celebrities, and again a tacit acknowledgement that trash made all lives transparent. In the case of famous people this made the cast offs of the private sphere extremely valuable. Whilst he may figure as merely a footnote in any social history of garbage, the significance of Weberman as an exemplar of a changing attitude toward garbage in modern society cannot be overlooked. In his memoir Weberman made an interesting observation when recalling his initial muckraking impulse and one that resonates with significance for the difficulty in maintaining a distinction between the subject and the world of objects in modernity. This relates specifically to the difficulty of maintaining a separation in modern society between the private and the public, of keeping and protecting the inside from the outside, and ultimately of establishing an identity between subject and object that fulfills the promise of autonomous freedom. "As I eyed the home of the reclusive poet," he recalls:

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<sup>19</sup> In *Don't Look Back*, D.A. Pennebaker's famous film of a 1965 tour of England, we can see earnest journalists ask Dylan what his 'message' was. With a mixture of exasperation and contempt he responds at one point: "always keep a clean head and carry a light bulb."



I wondered what went down behind the door that Dylan had slammed in my face. Just then I noticed Dylan's shiny new steel garbage can and said to myself, 'Now, there's something that was *inside* and it's *outside* now.'<sup>20</sup>

And this realisation of the boundary having been breached is the transformation that permits the entry of chance. Put another way, once what is inside is expelled it is no longer controlled, and in effect the necessity of the release of itself creates a contingency, because garbage like death, as Ivan Klíma says in his novel *Love and Garbage*, is indestructible. It never disappears. Upon reflection we may come to realise this with the certainty of a fact, but as with the mortal end we cannot actually foresee its arrival, and so what is thrown away in a positive act, the act of Self-creation, becomes contingent because we cannot know the final form or use of garbage. Once placed outside, these cast-offs become ambiguous. Garbage is both a threat to us and a gift to posterity. And in pursuit of these gifts, Weberman continued to steal the garbage of Bob Dylan for many years, and was unsurprisingly considered to be something of a parasite. Fittingly, for such an uncivil operator, a street encounter whilst rifling bins put an end to his interest in Dylan. Catching him amongst the discarded diapers, chicken bones and newspapers, Dylan gave him a beating for all the trouble he had caused him, and ultimately for being like "a pig."<sup>21</sup>

Thereafter, Weberman's muckraking was channeled in other directions, and amongst others subjected to his infamous 'garbanalysis' were John Mitchell (attorney general in the Nixon administration), Arthur Schlesinger ("a Harvard brains-truster for John F. Kennedy"), and the vice president to Richard Nixon, Spiro Agnew, amongst a host of other celebrities and politicians. Neither is it surprising that the famous 'garbanalysis' seemed to result in very little of substance beyond serving up the private life of some unfortunate public figure for all to see, and in the end the threat he once posed was dissipated by his own emergence as a public figure. In the end he was reduced to the level of a circus-sideshow.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> A.J. Weberman, *ibid*: vii. Weberman may be the source for Don DeLillo's 1960's 'garbage guerilla', Jesse Detwiler. See, DeLillo (1997) *Underworld*, London: 286ff.

<sup>21</sup> Weberman, *ibid*: 14-17. Dylan compared him to 'government phone-tappers' and his wife commented that 'compared to Bob, you are filth.'

<sup>22</sup> On Spiro Agnew for example: "I hit upon two garbifacts that took my breath away. One was a list titled 'Honorary Members of the Senate Red Cross,' with the home address of every notable in the U.S. Senate-people like Mamie Eisenhower and Margaret Truman thrown in for good measure. This was the key I had always dreamed of finding. Now I could realize my lifelong ambition of becoming the new J. Edgar Hoover of Washington, D.C. Only I'd go even farther than Hoover-not only would I accumulate 'dirt' on everyone important in government, I'd



Another interesting aspect of this particular kind of muckraking is that the so-called 'garbanalysis' can best be viewed as motivated by both the breakdown of identification (between Weberman and Dylan the 'folk singer') and a dislike of otherness (he had become 'establishment'). Thus, Bob Dylan having once been 'one of us,' part of the so-called 'counter-culture' supported by Weberman, became perceived as 'one of them,' and in retrospect this particular celebrity trash trawling may have had more in common with government espionage than he would dare admit. Here in both cases it is clear that discarded objects are used as a means to target an individual, and are therefore what allows the target to be objectified. Garbage, then, becomes gift, and the object is once again Sorted, although not according to the desires of the individual who bequeathed it.

For the most part Weberman indulged in a pseudo-ideological battle against traditional left-liberal hate-figures of the time, and at various points seems to have sought to provoke the kind of violent response that might lead to the most sensational news headlines. In fact publicity for his deeds was essential, and Weberman often made sure reporters accompanied him on his trash foraging expeditions.<sup>23</sup> So, although fearful of another target, Norman Mailer (much more noted then for his 'pugilism' than the relatively unthreatening Dylan), Weberman still felt that it was worth raking through the garbage cans left outside his apartment because of the guaranteed publicity. But unexpectedly, given his reputation, Mailer did not lose his temper when he sighted Weberman, nor did he seem overly concerned with the sight of a stranger in his garbage. "Mailer looked at me standing in the rubbish, poking round with a pocket flashlight, and walked on," Weberman notes. "From the look on his face he must have thought I was a government agent."<sup>24</sup> In a way Weberman's perception of how Norman Mailer probably viewed him – as a government agent – revealed as much about the similarities of himself and the G-Men as about any differences. Both sought to take leftover fragments and to objectify particular individual targets, and all that differed were the targets.

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accumulate everyone important in government's dirt! The other garbifact was a torn-up picture of Nixon shaking hands with Elvis! This official White House photograph was snapped right after Dick had made him an honorary narcotics officer!" Weberman did also produce jokey 'portraits' of his subjects (these are reproduced in his book), composed of their garbage, and compared himself to the noted Parisian artist, Armand, who used garbage in his art. Ibid: chs. 2 & 3.

<sup>23</sup> That publicity was his main objective is notable throughout his book, and was reflected in his choice of associates, who turned out to be equally adept at grabbing their own headlines: "In order to stay ahead of the competition I was forced to train an associate garbologist – Aron Morton Kay (who would later achieve notoriety as the man who throws pies at celebrities)" (xii).

<sup>24</sup> A.J. Weberman, *ibid*: 117



There was more than a hint of seriousness, however, in the covert trash covers of the FBI. These activities had more to do with cold war paranoia and with the widespread fear of ‘reds under the beds,’ with ‘foreign bodies’ that threatened to infect the system, than with the titillation of celebrity news headlines. The methods of espionage went far beyond the humiliation of subjects, however, suggesting a significant difference in the perception of garbage, though a similar awareness of the distinction between the inside and the outside (if not the same belief in what did and did not belong). Garbage was not only used to embarrass, but as a threat.

Once again, if garbage gets *outside* it represents a dangerous possibility, and therefore the point can easily become to keep it *inside*. In the political climate fostered by people like the FBI chief Edgar J. Hoover, to be ‘on the inside’ was primarily to be a patriot, and by extension perhaps, to be aware that there were traitors, or outsiders, around. In the paranoia surrounding life during the Cold War upstanding American citizens were supposed to conform to some objective ideal, or at least to a shared goal, in this case ‘the American way of life’ – a kind of safe and unthreatening normality that was free from the malign influences posed by any kind of deviation.<sup>25</sup> The danger of non-conformity from within, of communists in America, for example, suggested an acute awareness of how easily order could become disorder, that what is presently outside, despised and feared, must be guarded against lest it find a way in to contaminate the body politic. Indeed, the historical precedents are obvious.<sup>26</sup> As Machiavelli would have recognised, Hoover was merely living up to the reality that there is dirty work to be done, and that the point is not to deny or neglect this, but rather to wear clean gloves, to cover-up as a means of avoiding dirty hands. So, in terms of the maintenance of the body politic, the FBI view, and arguably the view of secret government agencies the world over, activities like ‘dumpster diving’ provide one way of inspecting, and hopefully preserving, this body.

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<sup>25</sup> This is interesting given the public knowledge of Hoover that has emerged since his death. In DeLillo’s *Underworld* we can also see him cavorting with the barely concealed underbelly of normality. Truthful or not, this kind of representation is consequent on a past that emerged following his death. In one scene, DeLillo shows Hoover as he sits in the stand at a football match with Frank Sinatra (suspected himself at various points in his life of mob connections and consorting with known communists). They indulge in bawdy exchanges over a hot dog – in the scene Hoover exits puking...on Sinatra’s shoes.

<sup>26</sup> Ever since Niccolo Machiavelli composed *The Prince* in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century as a guide to maintaining power against external threats, there has been an acceptance that statecraft can be a dirty business. Like the physical organism, it was recognised that the political commonwealth, often described as an ‘organism,’ or ‘body,’ was subject to attack from debilitating elements.



A fear of disorder (as is implied by the notion of 'official secrecy') had by the twentieth century created a whole economy of subterfuge, which more or less lived off the contingencies of trash, off of our 'leavings,' be they the material objects found in trash cans, or in the 'distorted' objects of unwelcome ideologies, and from the fact that this disconnection permits outside intervention. The fear of disorder thrived also in the awareness that once a level of control had been assumed, and that social rationalization had to some extent taken over, to maintain it soon became, in itself, a necessity, and as such, these imperatives conceal an expanding 'sphere' of chance; namely the 'sphere' of garbage. It was clear that uncontrollable events and unsorted objects might reveal a discontinuity between public and private personas, or between subjective and objective versions of 'reality.'

So it is that in times when the public has an unquenchable desire to know the smallest detail about the most insignificant public figure or minor celebrity, garbage then becomes characteristically unidentifiable in terms of the consequences it has for us. The idea of a fixed identity remains ultimately beyond subjective control, it vanishes to be replaced by the indeterminate and uncategorical collection of devalued objects that are themselves the consequence of progress, of control, and ultimately, of reason. Perhaps we can sum this up by suggesting that, in general, an *uneasiness* arises when borders and distinctions are blurred, and placing objects outside of the Self certainly creates a momentary doubt, as it passes from an object of identification, a Sort, to the unsorted and devalued matter that constitutes garbage.<sup>27</sup> A consciousness of this uncontrolled movement is necessarily self-consciousness, however; a realization that bits of you have been more or less 'chopped off.' To doubt is (in this case) to ponder on the wisdom of throwing out, and on the contrary implications of retention, which, as we have seen, can be equally debilitating to the Self.

Objects are thus the problem, whether keeping them, or throwing them away, but our attachment to objects often makes it difficult to remove them, and this gives objects that are cast out their potentially transforming power. This may also come as something

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<sup>27</sup> See William Miller (1997) *Anatomy of Disgust*, Cambridge, Mass. Miller explores the idea of 'disgust' in these terms suggesting, "disgust helps mark boundaries of culture and of the self. The boundaries of the self extend beyond the body to encompass a jurisdictional territory, what Erving Goffman calls a territorial preserve, which may be defined as any space that if intruded upon would engender rightful indignation or disgust in us. The size of this jurisdiction varies by culture, age, gender, class, and status. Generally, the higher a person's status, the larger the space within which offenses against that person can take place. In contrast, some people's jurisdiction may not reach beyond



of a surprise because now that these objects are garbage, they are surely spent, used up? Well, from the evidence of scavengers, ragpickers, and muckrakers, this is not at all obvious. It rather seems to be the case that as the worth of trash becomes divorced from its original utility and as soon as we no longer 'determine' its value, then we have entered a somewhat disordered set of circumstances. Instead of garbage being an undifferentiated mass of used up worth, it has become valued in the hands of others. Perhaps more like a Santa sack than the black plastic bag familiar to us all, except full of an unusual wonder.

And here, as an illustration of the precarious status of the Self is one of the most enduring tensions within modern society: our ability to assert our identity and to exercise the power of will over our own lives is compromised, paradoxically, by the very act of doing so, by consuming. That is because our identity is so inseparable from what we consume, and also, of course, because what we consume never really disappears, but returns eternally, in new forms. Just like the plastic that forms the basis for so many modern objects, a byproduct of oil, the 'garbage' of oil, oil which is itself transformed material. So, what we consume doesn't just go out through the 'back end,' end of story. Once it has been expelled there is always the possibility of another story to tell. And so, the potential for garbage to create a state of anxiety only develops with the technological and material progress of modern society, within the dream of modernity: which is to say, only after we have been separated from the necessity of personally dealing with our own byproducts. There is created here a distance, which sees many public and private aspects of life linked at opposite ends, and it gives them a common order; from eating to excrement, and fashion to garbage, the distance is created only within the compass of reason. And so only rationalized waste, particularly the remnants of the object world of modern consumer society, becomes garbage that is of interest to others.

Thus, it is plain that the muckraker is as obviously employed as anyone else, occupying a more or less hidden sector of the division of labour, and the fact is that if we all had to take care of our own waste, we would simply be too busy doing that to find other waste interesting. So, the fact that our garbage becomes, through some transvaluation, a gift, is only incidentally something to do with us, and actually more to do with chance. And chance, by some act of poesis, is merely the rubbish of reason.

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their skin, may not even include it: thus in some instances prisoners, slaves, prostitutes, and infants." (50) All categories of people, in other words, who have already been objectified as a matter of defining who and what they are.



## 15 Shadow of Momentum

have/ you stopped to think what existence is, to be here/  
now where so much has been or is yet to come and/  
where isness itself is just the name of a segment/  
of flow

A.R. AMMONS, *Garbage*

There is a dual aspect to the significance garbage has come to assume in the modern consciousness, and this applies also to the practicalities of garbage, to the way that we collectively deal with it, to what we might call the 'social relations' of garbage. The effect of our mediated experience of the object world is summed up by forgetfulness, a rational ignorance, on the one hand, and increasingly, on the other, fear. At a subjective level we have a desire to be in control of our immediate environment, of the space that provides the basis for our meaningful activities, and that therefore must help define who we are, who we may become.

If we accept that life in modern society is largely defined by our relationship to these spaces, and to the objects that furnish them, we must also accept that the proliferation of such 'things' means that we are never really that far removed from garbage, since this order is only maintained by creating garbage. The fact that an object becomes garbage just means that it is no longer controlled, it spells out the fluidity of identity in modernity. Our temporal existence persists on the basis of a succession of precarious identities; we are always at the risk of breaking free, being loosened, from the definitions that bind us to the shore, that seek to deny the fluidity of our surroundings.

The impulse to put garbage in its place is, in terms of day-to-day functioning, clearly a matter of personal autonomy in the most basic sense that we escape the ceaseless flow by establishing solidity in our identity relations. In other words, we leave nothing to chance, and so the removal of the rubbish of life makes space more easily negotiable, more resistant to change (Plate 33). The expulsion of garbage therefore



## GENTLE AIDS To Regular Elimination

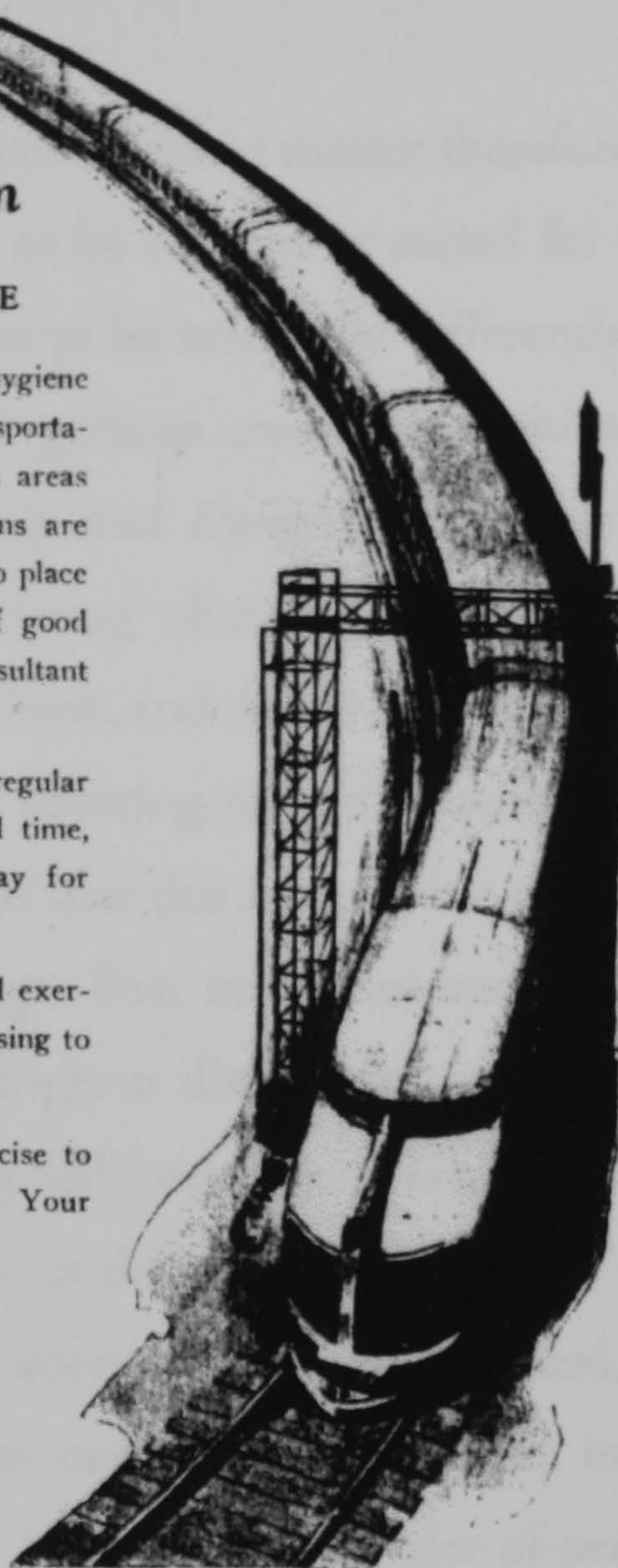
### MAINTAINING A REGULAR SCHEDULE

**I**N THIS era of high speed living, our practice of daily hygiene is often forsaken to accommodate modern modes of transportation and communication. Especially in the metropolitan areas is this true, where unfavorable eating and working conditions are contributing factors to neglected habits. It is this inclination to place the value of time and convenience above the importance of good health that is largely responsible for faulty elimination and resultant chronic constipation.

**T**HE bowel, like a modern railway train, must have a regular schedule of operation. There should be no delay. A fixed time, preferably soon after breakfast, should be allocated each day for bowel movement.

**E**QUALLY important to regular elimination are diet and exercise. You should have a particular time for eating and exercising to avoid indigestion and subsequent constipation.

**C**ONSULT your physician for a proper diet and exercise to assist in establishing a regular habit time of bowel movement. Your



cooperation in following his advice is imperative if you are to build and maintain a strong healthy body.

**T**HIS is the second of a series of educational advertisements on "Gentle Aids to Regular Elimination" by the makers of Petrolagar (an emulsion of pure mineral oil—65%—with agar-agar). Petrolagar, because it performs only a lubricating and softening function, is also a "gentle aid" to regular elimination. However, like diet or any other measure, Petrolagar should not be self prescribed. It is harmless, but certainly not a "cure-all." Best results in dealing with difficulties of the intestinal tract will invariably be obtained when a physician is given the opportunity to make a careful diagnosis and prescribe whatever measures fit the individual case. Another advertisement in this series will appear next month.

**PETROLAGAR LABORATORIES, INC.**

8134 McCormick Boulevard ♦ Chicago, Ill.

PLATE 33. GENTLE AIDS. Ever-faster motion threatens to hasten disorder. One way to tackle the threat is by sorting our lives into temporally manageable portions. The establishment of a regularized routine, as this advert so effectively points out, makes the transformation of the human body into one more component of a larger totality almost a necessity for survival. Like the trains that could not function efficiently without a concept of time, the individual in modern society may cease to function without acceding to external demands of time and place, and so the regularization of bodily functions objectifies the individual. Recent movements like Feng Shui stress the regulation of bodily movements, of healthy bowel movements, with the removal of garbage from life. See, for example, Karen Kingston (1998) *Clear Your Clutter With Feng Shui*, London. The author identifies at least a dozen types of clutter, including 'Mental, Emotional and Spiritual clutter,' and includes a handy guide to 'Clutter Clearing Your Body' that reflects almost exactly the concerns that this poster, published in the 1950's, sets out.



signifies the continual struggle for the survival of the physical organism, and the 'organism' of which it is merely a part, the body politic .

Taken as a sign of decomposition and degeneration, waste matter therefore belongs outside of order. It has already ceased, physically, to be ordered or sorted for the most efficient realization of its potential, and so it ceases to be materially differentiated. It is exhausted potential from the point of view of the garbage creator. So, whilst we may agree with Mary Douglas, who observes in *Purity and Danger*, her examination of pollution taboos in primitive cultures, that a 're-ordering' of matter that seeks to exclude dirt and waste can have a perfectly understandable basis, and that it is not driven by fear, that in fact it finds its motivation in the *positive* ordering of one's environment, it is nevertheless apparent that within a modern context that this is where we must insist on a separation of the significance of dirt and garbage. Post mass consumerism, fear has become a significant factor in our attitude to garbage, as distinct from dirt, as garbage represents the likely impossibility of differentiating Self from Other, *because* of the sheer volume of objects. So, garbage in modern society, as distinct from waste in 'primitive cultures' has an added dimension because of the amount of it that is produced, and also because these voluminous objects are what leaves meaning in modernity looking so empty; unlike the primitive re-ordering of matter (which sees the order of persons and matter as an element of a spiritual order), our modern sorting is a response to the profanity of existence. Thus, fears are realized in the implicit acceptance that there is ultimately no order of things, in the undesirability of losing control over our immediate surroundings, or in a fear of contamination, and ultimately in the reminder that we can be powerless to control our own lives.<sup>1</sup>

The rapidity with which relations are altered in modern society throws up questions of subject, object and identification. The transformation in matter that produces garbage goes, at one extreme, from the positive, that is, from subjective identification to, at the other, a total negation in the impossibility of objective identification, and suggests that we may never be able to leave behind the material and objective world we once, but no longer, identify with. In Western societies, for example, the modern environmental

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<sup>1</sup> See Mary Douglas (1966) *Purity and Danger*: Chs. 1 and 2, and William Miller (1997) *Anatomy of Disgust*, Cambridge, MA. Miller suggests that it is the *volume* of things, and of the sense we have of matter uncontrolled as a result, that can begin to erode our faith in the power of reason: "A single weed or a single weed is unlikely to be disgusting; but a host of them is a different matter much as the difference in affect raised by one cockroach and a thousand, one social inferior and a convocation." (42)



movement, which has quickly developed over the last thirty years, represents an undeniable fear that the failure to introduce a variety of austerity measures, to limit the production of waste, will amount to the destruction of the social and ecological environment.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, this fear arises from the success of reason in sorting the world, and thus promising that we can stem the endless flow of life, and also a profound lack of faith in the very reason that has granted such an awareness. There are two distinct aspects to this crisis of reason: on one hand the Gaia hypothesis, which suggests that degeneration would cease if only we could control the rubbish of life, and on the other, the Risk Society thesis, which urges a more realistic reappraisal of reason.

In the case of the former we see something like an anxiety of Sorts, a need to keep sorting eternally, to fend off death. This can be considered as one more extension of the hubris of reason, suggesting as it does, that nature, the infinite, can be limited by humanity; that, as Andrew Ross has said, “the ecosystemic operations of Earth as a single planetary organism constitute the ultimate realm of judgement in all matters biological.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, just as man created God, so now he creates this particular objectification, the ‘ecosystem’; as if the Earth truly ‘cared,’ as if reason could defy all natural forces of alteration, as if we weren’t passing through, part of the flow just as the planet surely is itself. We should make no mistake about the fact that reason manifested in our Sorts is just the delimitation of World.<sup>4</sup> The infinity of ‘the world’ beyond reason cannot be comprehended, or more correctly, it has not yet been. This is simply a matter of the world we create through our language use.<sup>5</sup> Each attempt to rationally recreate the world only reveals a corresponding lack of reason, in both the evidence, or remains, of what is consigned to the garbage, and in what such a reappraisal teaches us about our own limitations. Amongst other things, this entails that our efforts at ‘sustainability’ mark a desperate urge to halt movement, and that any success at doing so only emanates

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<sup>2</sup> In their terms this entails the reduction of consumption. In understanding the ambiguities of language surrounding consumption we can see the general point: Consumption is by definition destruction.

<sup>3</sup> See A. Ross (1994) *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life*, London: introduction.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. F.W.J Schelling (1978) *System of Transcendental Idealism*, Charlottesville. Schelling observes that “the concept of nature does not entail that there should also be an intelligence that is aware of it. Nature, it seems, would exist even if there were nothing that were aware of it.” (5)

<sup>5</sup> See Rorty (1989) *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Cambridge, on language and the world: “Positivist history of culture sees language as gradually shaping itself around the contours of the physical world. Romantic history of culture sees language as gradually bringing Spirit to self-consciousness. Nietzschean history of culture, and Davidsonian philosophy of language, see language as we now see evolution, as new forms of life constantly killing off old forms – not to accomplish higher forms, but blindly. Whereas the positivist sees Galileo as making a discovery – finally coming up with the words which were needed to fit the world properly, words Aristotle missed – the



from a ground of degeneration and destruction, and the progress of reason only succeeds in laying bare its limits, and thus the limitlessness of nature. We can, then, objectify nature, as the modern environmental impulse urges, by placing limits on our own destructive tendencies. But we should not avoid the charge of excessive vanity in supposing that we are 'stewards' of nature. Nature knows no bounds.<sup>6</sup> The risk society thesis, on the other hand, developed as an implicit recognition of the ceaseless production of contingencies in modern society, with the complexity and fluidity of social relations, industrial and technological advances in all domains of life. Arguing that risks are now largely hidden, this thesis, fails to fully acknowledge the grounding of reason in chance; as the probabilistic calculation of modern social problems is just one more aspect of the Sorting that by its terms contributes to the contemporary ignorance of how close to the surface the contingent always is. With technological progress now accompanied by an inflation of identifiable risks, the response is to suggest further strategies, involving more Sorts, toward a minimization of risks.<sup>7</sup>

The problem in provoking a public response to such modern crises is that they are stated in such abstract terms that subjectively they become difficult to identify with. As Zygmunt Bauman observes, these risks:

May never reach the realm of subjective experience — they may be trivialized or downright denied before they arrive there, and the chance that they will indeed be barred from arriving *grows* together with the extent of the risks.<sup>8</sup>

The risk society thesis can also be understood in the following terms: it implies a world of looming Unsorts; of industrial, environmental, social, and every other kind of rubbish. These domains remain impervious to our Sorts, because they are at the point of overflowing with excess, because of the speed of movement that characterizes the processes reason always has to realign itself to contain. This overflowing waste is seen in reason's various 'errors,' 'accidents,' and 'exceptions.'

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Davidsonian sees him as having hit upon a tool which happened to work better for certain purposes than any previous tool." (19)

<sup>6</sup> See David Thomson (1999) *In Nevada*, London. Thomson issues the charge of vanity: "There is a vanity and a righteousness in the 'stewardship' of the Earth that defies all the natural forces of alteration – the drift of continents, the upheaval of earthquake, the rage of fire and rain – that would go on whether or not the Earth was inhabited." (156)

<sup>7</sup> See Beck (1985) *Risk Society*, London. Beck makes a distinction between modern and pre-modern risks – arguing that contemporary hazards are far more numerous and challenging to calculate than risks in pre-industrial cultures. The threats of plague, famine, natural catastrophes, wars, that induced fear and irrationality in pre-modern peoples, had such a power because of their incalculability (and because they were attributed to supernatural forces).



If we understand that garbage in modernity has become emblematic of a fear based on the impossibility of identifying with undifferentiated matter; ultimately with controlling it, then this goes beyond a problem arising from the difficulty in positively ordering our environment. In modern society the speed of production, and the changing pace of life renders our very attempts to Sort the world of objects by means of criteria of inclusion and exclusion, a response to the fearful associations the rational mind draws between its own dictates and any kind of excess. Simply put, having ‘too much,’ however one might determine that, is a compromise to self-containment, because in terms of our identification with the world surrounding us, it is to have little ‘bits’ of oneself all over the place, exposed to chance. So, whilst we may elaborate ideas of a ‘better’ or more ‘perfect’ world, these are surely derived from the fear of disorder.’ How else can we explain the extent to which this desire to effect some order on the physical environment has resulted in a kind of consumption paranoia, a fear of the consequences of life lived through the consumption of more than necessities, a recognition of the creeping death that waste obviously comes to represent?<sup>10</sup>

In his 1995 novel *Underworld*, Don DeLillo presents a panoramic view of the history of the United States in the last fifty years of the twentieth century. Central to the life of Nick Shay, the main character of the story, is the multi-faceted nature of garbage. In his world, his life we can see is determined by the past that brings him face to face with the messed up present. Garbage comes to represent the final frontier of human autonomy; it is the sign that says This Far and No Further, and beyond which lies the *might-have-been*, the contingent lives that were snuffed out by the Leibnizian necessity of causes: still there in memory as unrealized causes, hopes without end. Leibniz, we remember, tethered freedom to contingent history. Memory, as Nick Shay discovers, gets caught in a thicket of chance, dwelling on possible lives because, as Leibniz would have it, whilst there is always a reason – a greater inclination for what has been chosen –

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<sup>8</sup> Z. Bauman (2000) *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: 210.

<sup>9</sup> Is this the basis for all Utopias? It certainly seemed to be the basis for Hobbes justification of the state, and sovereign power. See chapter two below.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, Rathje and Murphy, *ibid*, suggest that concerns over the volume of garbage, as voiced by the environmental lobby, overtake the progress in waste management, and innovations in reducing energy use and pollution that have arisen merely as the result of economic necessities. They argue that environmentally sponsored waste management policies in the United States ignore the growing rationalization of garbage, and lead to the promotion of a number of myths regarding garbage that ultimately lead to ‘environmentally-friendly’ regulations, that often turn out to be environmentally damaging.



“this inclination does not master freedom.”<sup>11</sup> In *Underworld*, garbage ‘presents’ itself as an obstacle to the forlorn hope that we can be author of our own biographies when life is more or less trapped by the twin forces of causal necessity (i.e., the present) and memory (i.e., the past), which, it is implied, are productive of so much garbage. Garbage, as such, is the material representation of a fear that history, in the form of memory, assumes dominance over the present and future, as inevitable as the bodies we stand in. And so, in striking out against this necessity, a mania for order becomes Shay’s guiding principle in life. Like the past that he is continually revisiting and trying to Sort, to find meaning in it, his life in the present becomes representative of a keen awareness of the power of self-consciousness, of the doubt that burdens the modern mind. This, of course, is summed up in a paradox of Sorts: his memory of the past is both an emblem of his freedom, and yet a power that can also undermine rational autonomy to devastating effect.

Shay, the mature man we see flitting between past and present, having been rescued from a dissolute life by the Jesuits, appropriately enough becomes the modern equivalent of these scholastic Sorters; an organizer of the unnecessary, a waste consultant. We are asked to visualize this at times haunted figure traveling between continents to observe the workings of landfill sites, with his flitting to and fro in imagination, the memories of his past a disturbing analogy to the garbage that he can’t get away from, buried, like his past, just below the surface. Thus, the highly visible character of garbage in his life unavoidably leads him to see the world through the teeming objects of a consumer culture driven by commercial gluttony; and these various products as merely disguised garbage, their future status assured. “Marian and I saw products as garbage even when they sat gleaming on store shelves, yet unbought,” he says, revealing a rational foresight absent in most consumers:

We didn’t say, what kind of casserole will that make? We said, What kind of garbage will that make? Safe, clean, neat, easily disposed of? Can the package be recycled and come back as a tawny envelope that is difficult to lick closed? First we saw the garbage, then we saw the product as food or lightbulbs or dandruff shampoo. How does it measure up as waste, we asked. We asked whether it is responsible to eat a certain item if the package the item comes in will live a million years.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Leibniz (1973) ‘A Letter on Freedom, 1689,’ in *Philosophical Writings*, London: 112-14.

<sup>12</sup> Don DeLillo (1997) *Underworld*, London: 121. On the development of modern environmentalism see also A. Ross, *ibid.*



But as we have seen, memory in the mass consumption object world is flushed out, like the excretions that might hinder our movement if not expelled. DeLillo's Shay becomes stuck in a mess because he is over-conscious of the causal connection between past and present, between consumption and garbage. He literally stands amidst the garbage of modernity. "Every bad smell is about us," he says, surrounded by mountains of trash heaped like pyramids.

We make our way through the world and come upon a scene that is medieval-modern, a city of high rise garbage, the hell reek of every perishable object ever thrown together, and it seems like something we've been carrying all our lives.<sup>13</sup>

This can only be the response when we do become aware of the consequences of the eternal return of garbage – the narrator here is in the business of garbage *control*, and this justly explains his inability to banish garbage to the void of his subconscious. Having a close proximity to all sorts of garbage does not permit him to forget, but more importantly than that is the kind of response it provokes. Contrast this with the ideal consumer in a world of arriving obsolescence; caught up in desire, in the necessity of satisfying some need, can anyone be concerned about the immediate future, never mind the fate of the world millions of years hence? The character of Shay illustrates one more overestimation of the power of reason, one more possibility that the application of will can force a standstill; and this in the apparent unwillingness to easily accept that there is a natural process of degeneration, and that reason, try as it may, cannot separate us from this.

Such an impulse is shared with the other stewards of nature. The difference is that Nick Shay in *Underworld* meets his fears not with a reduction of objects, but rather with fresh holes in which to bury these dead and exhausted products of accelerated hope. Standing over a hole in the ground lined with plastic membrane and outfitted with a gas-control system, he listens as his colleague mentions the value that would be produced by the buried debris of modern life. And he feels elated.<sup>14</sup> It seems unavoidable that we should observe that someone who has a great degree of control over his life, who perhaps has illusions of immortality, could mix up his own destiny with that of the world. DeLillo's Shay illustrates the difficulty of maintaining the Self against the

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<sup>13</sup> DeLillo, *ibid*: 104.



contingencies of Past and Future, because the world that was once objectified in the history books, and in his schooling in the catholic seminary, as striving towards some kind of harmony that repays diligence, is replaced by a world full of Unsorts, of sense made nonsense, and of value transvalued into garbage. This is, as well, the disparity between Object(s) and beliefs that can no longer be bridged in an act of identification, in this case with the present.

The past, as the platform to the present, dispatches us in a forward motion so long as we are facing in the appropriate direction. In modern society we become impervious to many of the practicalities and effects of garbage, to the process of its disposal certainly, and also to the consequences of voluminous amounts of garbage. The central figure in *Underworld* represents a break in the continuity of our perceptions, an upsetting of accepted causal relations that lead from past to present. In this tale garbage becomes a *reminder* of something else – a world that we don't really control, an existence where a contingent element grows ever greater. This, then, is the eternal return of garbage as an uneasy fear or paranoia. A more accurate portrayal of the modern attitude toward garbage, particularly the fear of over-consumption, would probably reveal that it is in the fact that we cling to some idea that we can construct a living environment that represents 'us,' some Arcadian dream of nature unspoiled, that forces the discontinuities in our experience to transform the dream to a nightmare.

In our attitudes to garbage we also find a disproportionate preoccupation with the unexpected, once again in an apparent *fear* of having the Self submerged in some other conditions of objectification, insofar as garbage makes the Self transparent, and also in the material sense that garbage threatens our spaces, the spaces of future plans, and thus our ability to keep moving. An interesting consequence of this is that we find scavengers mostly amongst non-western economies; in western economies the underprivileged, may still occupy this position, although this has become less prevalent since in the last one hundred years.<sup>15</sup> It seems that this is not only a question of relative poverty.<sup>16</sup> The existence of scavengers tells us something about the amount of control exercised by

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid: "I listened to Sims recite the numbers, how much methane we would recover to light how many homes, and I felt a weird elation, a loyalty to the company and the cause." (285)

<sup>15</sup> See Susan Strasser (1999) *Waste and Want: a Social History of Trash*, New York: Ch.1

<sup>16</sup> Which is to say that, in relative terms, the modern west may have sizeable pockets of poverty. But this is beside the point. What is to the point in considering the disappearance of scavenging is that the rationalized welfare states of many western countries largely prevent the poor from living off garbage, as they would have done in years gone past. See Strasser, *ibid*.



government, and also about the connection between material wealth and autonomy. If waste disposal had become first privatized, and through rational Sorting, depersonalized the world over for generations, as it has in the most 'modern' economies, then disgust conventions, at least, would caution against proximity to garbage, with the likely sanction being social exclusion. In societies old and new this is indeed the fate of the powerless. But as I have said, the reasons for this go beyond notions of purity, which are built upon 'sacred' hierarchies and rituals; it is not just a matter of garbage being dirty. It is the fact that garbage can come to be a reminder of a past that is the fact that convinces us that this is a question of old against new, and furthermore that a preoccupation with novelty and fashion is a both a cause and consequence of the abundance of objects in modern society. Our need to control garbage is a simple consequence of civilizing processes reaching toward some logical end; modernity undoubtedly throws up all kinds of industrial horrors, but it does so whilst providing the means for "an unprecedented cleanup of human beings and their societies," says Joseph Amato in his history of dust. "It permitted humans en masse to improve their dwellings and communities, freeing themselves from the old tyrannies of dust, dirt, parasites, and disease."<sup>17</sup> This is the colonization of chance by reason. The problem is that the territory we create, waste filled, no less, keeps expanding.

The transvaluation of objects, which takes us from invisible garbage (potential value) to visible garbage (value exhausted), from forgetfulness to fear, is predicated on the realization that the modern world cannot save us, that reason can be fallible and that we will always have to face the final disorder that is death. Slowly, perhaps imperceptibly, although only upon reflection, we come to associate garbage with destruction, with the possibility of the removal of order and meaning and with a loss of control. In our fear we seem to be more conscious of death, and it is perhaps through consideration of this inevitability, that we recognise decay in other forms, particularly in the eternally returning garbage.

The removal of garbage becomes a necessity, because in modern society the removal of the person is no longer a viable option. 'Normal' living is characterized as stable and ordered, not itinerant and chaotic.<sup>18</sup> We cannot walk away because the *motion* of

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<sup>17</sup> Joseph A. Amato (1999) *Dust: A History of the Small and the Invisible*, Berkeley: 69.

<sup>18</sup> Again this point, and the notion of property as an aspect of the modern notion of controlled motion should be contrasted with the Douglas notion of dirt, and perhaps with anthropological views generally.



modern life demands fixed, and more or less predictable, modes of living. The concept of 'property,' taken as the objectification of a material world we can identify in terms of its apparent solidity, symbolizes modernity's attempt to quell motion. Bricks and mortar erect an order, and psychologically as well as physically represent stability, a life Sorted. Thus normality is identified, in this context, on a material basis; stability symbolizes an important aspect of the relationship between subject and object in modernity, and acts as the delimitation of freedom.<sup>19</sup> That is to say, normality would seem to signify a power to remain still amongst the flow. But it is also a power that contributes to the continuation of this flow; to be in a position to conspicuously discard 'used' goods, to treat previously valued items as worthless. Thus to create garbage, indicates an obvious ability to replenish one's material comfort. This is a power to consolidate, which is at the same time a power of exclusion, and thus to place motion within fixed limits. The fact of this material discrimination, finds analogy in the way we use language in aid of perfecting Sorts, to both assign inclusion and to designate the excluded.

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<sup>19</sup> Conceptually this is a consequence of the idea, originated in John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* of 1690, that property in selfhood is fully realised as freedom only with the attainment of fixed property in physical space, parcels of land, which then restrict movement.





PLATE 34. EXPLODED PIECE (IN PROGRESS), Jackie Winsor, 1980-82.



CONCLUSION

In our country everything is being forever remade: beliefs, buildings and street names. Sometimes the progress of time is concealed and at others feigned, so long as nothing remains as real and truthful as testimony

IVAN KLÍMA, *Love and Garbage*



## § Ornamental Existence

In modern society the radically contingent is largely concealed. By definition it can be no other way; the radically contingent is the exception to the rule, the accident that crushes necessity, and the unwelcome exception to rational expectation. Thus the relationship between social and individual forms of ordering social life and the human social experience of disorder is, I have sought to show, a necessary one.

In a sense everything in life is contingent; life itself at its most basic is nothing but movement. It is, in other words, constituted in history and memory as a series of chance events (for example, the collision of contingent causal chains that determine one's own existence), although reason renders these as *necessary contingents*, as almost an orderly procession linking past to present. To go too far in admitting that the present could have been other than it is, would be to undermine the relatively stable foundations of reason and history. And, of course, this is how it must be as well — but it is only orderly because we have made it so; there is no potential in the past, only in *being* and *becoming*. Thus there is no inherent pattern in the course of human affairs that does not depend on the strenuous efforts of reason. Outside of order is nothingness, or disorder; that which cannot be accommodated, or moulded within the forms that allow reason to establish the relations that objectify the world.

In my elaboration of three negative categories of social being ('loss,' 'residue,' and 'garbage') I have sought to understand social and individual forms and ways of ordering life by starkly contrasting forms of social order that I take to be examples of the regulation of life in modern society. I have argued, however, that such ordering does not act as a constraint on upon rational autonomy (which is ultimately a self-contained



order), and that, in fact, it is the way in which modern society permits the individual pursuit of freedom that often forces a human confrontation with disorder.

In virtue of the confrontation with disorder (whether experienced in real terms, or as an unwelcome possibility in imagination) social being is then constituted as a somewhat ornamental arrangement of what belongs – of what is identifiable – and of what realises a rational form that can be grasped. In other words disorder forces the reason to reassert itself. The ornaments of existence thus provide the comfortable knowledge that if there is no natural necessity, there is at least order and reason, and the regularity found in the world as ordered by reason gives form to subjective experience and determines a set of expectations based on what our rational and critical understanding apprehends by way of the senses.

In a literal example of how the realist world picture embellishes existence, and thus ‘makes’ the world, we can look at *Exploded Piece*, a work constructed between 1980 and 1982 by Jackie Winsor, resulting in the representation of perfection in the primary form of a cube. Yet, like all sensible primary qualities, this form conceals what we cannot apprehend by use of the senses – in this case, the secret of its creation. By rendering the work complete only with two images – one of the final object (Plate 1) and the other the materials employed in the making process (Plate 34) – we see that this perfect cube was moulded into its photographically recorded appearance of purity from fragmentary remains (namely, concrete, plaster and explosive residue) after being blown-up by a destructive charge to allow for the literal act of remaking. This is a dramatic re-enactment of the way reason makes the object world, the way we pattern and design existence, and of how ornamental existence is merely the re-arrangement of once random and unidentifiable garbage into new forms.

Ornamental existence consists of not only physical objects, but objects of knowledge; objects of history and memory, too. In subjective memory especially, the garbage of life is covered by a need to keep the uneasy past sorted into a place where it can do no harm. In the failure of forgetting the messy remains of experience ends up, like landfill waste, buried beneath a surface that masks the contents, and that is regularly smoothed over by fresh layers of dirt. Thus in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, Nick Shay knows that the past is only precariously, contingently, connected to the present, that it is the ‘underneath’ that threatens to drag him back from the world selectively made by memory; a world that is only finally brought together in the present by smoothing out



the jagged surface, which is to say, by putting things 'in their place,' and by neatly arranging personal history in order that the forward movement of life is not impeded.

The radically contingent as the disordered and residual elements of the creation and elaboration of categories of value and meaning is thus dealt with by an act of separation – by the removal and assimilation of what can be rendered as an object of sense, from that which does not make sense and thus disorder becomes a necessary (although unacknowledged part of ornamental life. Order in general is then the metaphorical 'mask' of being; a being which itself contains an incipient disorder (in the form of individual freedom). But this disorder is not chaos. It is not, as I have argued, simply the source of nihilism, but rather a necessary means of re-ordering (in allowing the value of reason to be re-established or elaborated through new categories of understanding), of creativity (for example, in pushing forth new means of expressing life through art). Disorder is, then, a somewhat paradoxical sign that foretells a periodic renewal of our understanding of how the world can be more finely sorted for the sake of maintaining that which we value (life) against disorder.



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