

GLOWN MANIFESTO*

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<http://clowndeadthpeepshow.com>

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1.

Tonight is a very special night. Leonrodhaus für Kunst *stellt aus*, yes, but also on this night, exactly one century ago, Marcel Duchamp decided he would stop painting forever. He had already talked publicly of his dissatisfaction with “retinal” art – with any kind of art that aims only to please the eye. In the months that followed, he announced his principle of the Readymades – manufactured objects selected by the artist and presented as art – and began producing them with the specific intent of provoking the observer to actively *think*. In an anonymous manifesto printed by art journal *Blind Man*, to accompany reproductions of his Readymade *Fountain*, Duchamp writes: “Whether Mr Mutt made the fountain with his own hands or not has no importance. He **CHOSE** it. He took an 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.” Since then, artists have invented countless new ways of shifting our focus from the eye to the mind, of creating a kind of art based on the strength and novelty of its concept, rather than the intensity with which it strikes the senses.

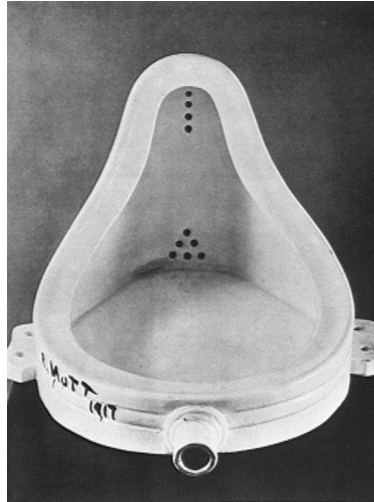
To work in concepts has become *de rigueur* for all artists, not just those working in conceptual art strictly speaking. The implication, it seems, is that anyone can paint a pretty picture, but its value will always be limited to some dubious personal enjoyment in the eye – literally the *retina* – of the beholder. Duchamp’s invention then is groundbreaking. At the same time that it transposes the art object from material to psychological reality, it lifts the burden of judgment from the domain of private opinion to that of public discourse. To find its precedent we would have to look outside of art, to the foundational gesture of science, when John Locke argued for a distinction between primary and secondary qualities, i.e. between objective and subjective data.

2.

Locke was not the first to make this distinction, or to value one kind of experience more highly than another. We would have to go all the way back to Plato’s *Republic* – to his distinction between *οὐσία* (substances, or *being*) and *γένεσις* (genesis, or *becoming*) – to find its true origins. Which leads us to a curious paradox. To be “contemporary” in the arts means simply to align one’s creative impulse with the imperative to think; or, to put it another way, to proceed always from an impulse that is in and of the mind, rather than following one that is in and of the body. But this value system – the “contemporary” principle for organizing actions and experience – is the oldest one there is. It’s at the very heart of Plato’s argument for kicking all painters out of the city. People who paint pretty pictures, so the argument goes, align our actions and experience with the outward appearance of things, that is: with a stimulus that engages the retina but is of no use to the mind.

This is not the danger of deception, of virtual reality or *simulacrum*; Plato is not afraid people will actually try to play the painting of a flute (his example). The danger is that people will learn to judge a flute, to make decisions about the good and the bad flute, according to its image – which is all a pretty picture has to offer. This kind of distraction prevents us from upholding our civic duty to transcend conjecture and opinion – our duty to *think* as a universal subject.

From this point of view, *it is with Marcel Duchamp that art finally joins the ranks of the most established and conservative value system Western culture has ever known.*



Fountain (1917) by Marcel Duchamp.

You will object that Duchamp’s engagement with thinking is ironic. The Readymades do not organize thought into a logical system. They confound it. They critique it. They enact the dispersal of logical systems. Duchamp is a kind of artist clown. Dadaism as a whole should be seen as the opposite of civic duty. It is a kind of nihilism. But even nihilism compels us to think: to rethink, to un-think, but to think nonetheless. It focuses our energy on the work of thought, which, like the juggler, cannot play with chance except in a game to win back control, to maintain the thinking of true thoughts. What is important then is not the opposition of reason vs. irrational thoughts, conservative vs. revolutionary thoughts, but whether we choose to think at all.

3.

It seems then that *we are presented with a choice: to act on an impulse that is in and of the body or one that is in and of the mind.*

Do we really need to choose? The mind, after all, is inside the body – no reason to think of it in the old-fashioned sense of an “empire within an empire.” And still we *are* presented with a choice. Perhaps the proper distinction is not between body and mind, but between those impulses, on the one hand, that lead us into time, into the Event of time where the body changes and suffers (the so-called “passions”), and those impulses, on the other hand, that lead us outside of time, outside the body, to see the Event from the outside. This is all that Plato meant by his distinction between *becoming* and *being*. The man who loves truth (the philosopher) trains his thoughts and actions on an impulse outside of time – that is, on *being* – in order that he may speak of the world in terms that transcend the limitations of the here and now. To stand outside of time, it would seem, gives the thinker a certain power over it. To grasp the Event is to control it. Science seeks this kind of control over the Event, as does the software in all the gadgets that shape contemporary life. Because all moments are present at once in the scientific model of a phenomenon, because all possible input-output sequences are anticipated in advance by the computer program, what these “cultures” offer us is an experience of time from which all actual time has been eliminated. We have won the game of control, but only at the expense of our secret knowledge of time, how to enter into time and remain there.

We can see now that our contemporary dilemma as artists – if not as human beings – is not about deciding between two competing paradigms (conceptual vs. non-conceptual art). It is about confronting the powerful impulse inside each of us to eliminate the body, together with the time it occupies, from a wide range of everyday experiences.

How do we begin? Will it be necessary to stop *thinking*, to stop *being*? Perhaps. But this kind of strategy only seems useful to me if it is accompanied by an effort to *make* and to *do*. Even then, in making and doing, we will be tempted to anticipate all our actions, to evade the moment. There is nothing in this strategy that will compel us to enter into time and remain there.

It would be more useful to set our aims more directly at the heart of the problem: to create experiences that will help us dismantle the culture of control. The body is not dead (as thinkers like Nietzsche and Freud are apt to remind us); it has only been driven underground. It still lives and breathes there, beyond our powers of proprioception, like the pagan rituals underlying Christian holidays, or the streams that continue to flow everywhere beneath the streets of Manhattan. No need to stop thinking. What we need are strategies for reversing the order, aligning our actions and experiences with those subterranean impulses – to plant our center of agency in a body that is always becoming, and forget for a while about control, about the precious work of the mind.

4.

How do we find the body once it has been buried underground? What techniques or technologies might help us regain the open time that “control culture” has eliminated? Photography, cinema and television are, at best, ambiguous allies. They present us with a kind of time that exists at any moment to be replayed, now or later, backwards or forwards, *ad infinitum*. As Siegfried Kracauer argues (and early avant-garde filmmakers like Jean Epstein and Dziga Vertov), something here really is freed from its static material and ideological coordinates. With cinema, our collective perspective on the world expands, opens up to infinite new formulations, to chance and to change. Time, if not the body, begins once more to bloom in the 20th century image. Perhaps that explains the enormous investment on the part of control culture to colonize the image, to close once more, with its continuity (“Hollywood”) editing and narrative closure, what the invention of photography pried open.

Recordable media of all kinds present us with the same problem – records, cds, mp3s offer an experience in which everything is organized in advance, that is individual and private, refocusing the energy of sound inside the head (with headphones) rather than offering an experience in which the Event unfolds in the here and now, in real space occupied by real human bodies. Facebook, which is the basic principle of the internet as a whole, provides us with a powerful technology for living all our social relations outside of time, outside the moment. It is the most comprehensive expression to date of our desire for control at the expense of life. With each step we take, it seems, we are farther from the moment, rich with chance and novelty, when we would be face to face at last with other human beings – the moment when we would let go of control in order to allow time and body to change us.

5.

Of all the various “cultures” through which we seek to engage our world, it seems that only live performance offers an Event in which we may participate collectively in the open flow of bodies and time. But even here we find the imperative, at various degrees, to transcend the present moment, to organize our movements according to a fixed plan. The script, the score, the choreography – all this is necessary to maintain some minimum control over chance, over time, to present the audience with an aesthetically organized experience.

It is true, some minimum control is necessary to make room for play, to maintain an open space for spontaneous self-organization and not simply chaos. But we live in extreme times, and we must take extreme measures. We cannot take aim at the culture of control if some part of us remains safely behind the scenes, a secure knot of thinking-and-being attached like an umbilicus to the Event on stage.

We can no longer be content to play the role of the juggler who throws one ball in the air only to catch secure hold of another. We need a juggler who drops everything at once, a juggler in crisis, who is no longer hidden from view by the habitual movement of his arms.

What we need is a clown.

The clown is the raw impulse of the body – the body left on stage, inside the Event, at the moment the mind is thrown into panic, confronted with the experience of real time, where all of its plans fall apart, where all its knowledge is worthless.

The clown is what is left behind when the mind begins back-pedaling, frantically trying to regain the moment when there was still time to think. “Think!” cries the audience. “Think!” cries God. But it is too late.

The clown is the body at minimum activity, but never at zero activity. The clown is always doing something – falteringly, clumsily, without aim or issue – because it is a body permeated by real time. In the absence of a script or choreography, the clown’s body gives rise to unconscious movements and nervous tics. They are cultivated by the clown, amplified by the stage.

The clown has no plan. So the clown suffers endlessly, heroically, in the fire of time – the clown burns at the stake planted there by the culture of control, to satisfy our expectation that there should have been a guiding principle to escape the frenzy of the present moment, that there should have been a plan.

It is for the same reason that the clown experiences real joy whenever something new arises, something the clown can play with: a member of the audience sneezes, a baby starts crying, a police siren in the street begins to wail. In the world of the clown, every little event is like manna from heaven. It brings the clown from misery to elation. And back to misery again. Outside the world of the clown, only children, manic depressives, and people in love know these extremes.

When the audience is watching a clown struggle on stage, they find it easier in that moment to admit that they also have no plan, that all their confidence – at those times when they felt confident – was based on nothing more than an idealized self-image: the man in control, the woman in charge. This revelation comes as a relief, first because it lifts from their shoulders the burden of control, and second (which is the same thing) because love is only possible in the space left empty by foiled plans.

The clown is a colossal failure. The clown tries to die for our sins, but has trouble nailing himself to the cross. We should think of the clown like a martyr, but we have forgotten all about him by the time we get home.

** Clown Manifesto was performed at Leonrodhaus für Kunst in Munich on September 12, 2014, to the progressively deafening accompaniment of clown horns and cartoon sound effects, on September 12, 2014, in connection with “Leonrodhaus für Kunst Stellt Aus” and October 2 opening of CLOWN DEATH PEEP SHOW.*