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The Readymades of Marcel Duchamp: The Ambiguities of an Aesthetic Revolution

The effort of philosophers in the 1950s to demonstrate, following Wittgenstein's theory of open concepts, that art could not be defined has not hindered some contemporary aestheticians from making the attempt. At the heart of such discussions, at least in the visual arts, lie Marcel Duchamp's readymades, which more than any other experiment has challenged the boundaries and even the foundations of art as a concept. In the second decade of this century, Duchamp selected commonplace objects, including a urinal provocatively entitled Fountain, and shook the art world by exhibiting them, often physically unaltered except for the appearance of the artist's signature, on pedestals in museums. After the initial reactions of laughter or disgust, the readymades held their status as artworks, usually categorized as sculpture, and since have become the art world's cul-de-sac, over which any attempt to define art must leap. Not only did the readymades find their way into permanent museum collections, but they solidified their position in the academic history of art by crucially influencing later developments. Without Duchamp's experiments it is likely that the Pop Art celebration of everyday objects or the current profusion of "junk" sculpture might never have occurred. In any case, such vigorous movements have helped theorists perceive the inadequacies of traditional criteria for art, such as imitation or expression, and have encouraged them either to abandon definition altogether or pursue it in some other direction.

The attempt to define anything is by nature a conservative activity. Conceptual definitions are necessarily exclusive; they focus on particular, selected characteristics at the expense of actual uniqueness or diversity. They allow us to order our experience by grouping certain things together and leaving others out. If Marcel Duchamp presents an object that radically questions the borders of any definition of art, an object that cannot be ignored because it has been accepted in practice as art, the conservative critic seeks to enlarge the borders of theory and thus absorb the rebellion. While the peculiar, irresolvable nature of the readymade threatens to undermine this endeavor with the assertion that everything (or, of course, nothing) is art, it also surprisingly helps to further the conventional cause. The strange paradox embodied in the readymade is that, depending on the interpretation one accords it, the object can support the extremes of both anarchist and staunchly conservative theories of art. The split impulses, I believe, can be traced back to Duchamp's own enigmatic writing, where he is at once a self-proclaimed iconoclast and a preserver of the most oppressive strain of traditional aesthetic value. The conservative interpretation of the readymade, supplied in part by Duchamp himself, has allowed the proponents of the Institutional Theory of Art, today's leading candidate for a definition of art, to overcome the Dada ob-

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The Readymades of Marcel Duchamp

Examination. Hung upside down and suspended from the ceiling, The Bottle rack cannot possibly be appreciated as a tool for drying bottles. Yet the strangeness of its form—the threatening protrusion of metal spikes layered symmetrically along conical shape—suddenly becomes apparent.

Such an interpretation of the readymade can, but does not necessarily, lead to the revolutionary pan-aesthetics that Mukhovorovsky hinted at and feared. Formalism has often proved a most conservative enterprise which in no way sanctions the belief that anything can be art. The New Critics sought rather to isolate literature from nonartistic phenomena, to award it special “aesthetic” status, much as Clive Bell privileged painting through “significant form.” Formalism can become a type of puritanism where disinterested formal scrutiny permits an object to transcend the vulgar world of use and change. Clement Greenberg discussed the importance of abstract art in exactly this way. The avant-garde artist strives to achieve the full formal potential of his medium and thus arrives at an immutable absolute that divorces high culture from transient and degraded public culture.

Hence it developed that the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to “experiment,” but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence. Retiring from the public altogether, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing it and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point. “Art for art’s sake” and “pure poetry” appear and subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like the plague.

Even confronting the readymades, these most banal objects, a formalist need not forsake the distinction he desires between art and the common world. Instead of seeing that all objects share in potential the special “aesthetic” quality usually ascribed only to works in a museum, he marvels at the thought that a few common objects have been elevated to the stature of artworks. Hence Danto calls his book-length explanation of the readymades and the Pop artifacts they inspired The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. He praises Duchamp, “who first performed the sublime miracle of transforming, into works of art, objects from the commonplace existence.” The “miracle” metaphor tips off Danto’s strategy; he is willing to allow that the urinal or bottle rack is art only because they have crossed some mystical borderline where they shed their existence as “mere real things.” For Danto, as we shall see later, the readymade ironically makes clear the distance between art and the commonplace.

Of course, it is actually impossible to tell which concept moves in which direction. Do common objects rise to art, or does art fall to the everyday? Duchamp considered the possibility of a reverse readymade, a Rembrandt used as an ironing board. He also drew a mustache on a reproduction of the Mona Lisa, presumably to demonstrate that academic art was not sacred, at least no more sacred than a properly displayed urinal. Jack Burnham, inverting Danto’s contention that the readymades were somehow elevated, claims that Duchamp’s cult “sought to denigrate sculpture to the status of mundane object.” Pushed to its most radical implication, Duchamp’s experiment abolishes the line between art and anything else, rendering art a useless and arbitrary label. All objects become works of art, just as all works of art become not-so-extraordinary objects. If you observe a urinal in a museum and realize its formal potential as art, a formalist need no different from that of a Brancusi or a Moore, there is nothing to stop you from regarding an identical urinal in the Van Pelt bathroom as art. The application of the formal principle is unlimited. If a urinal, why not a doorknob? As you leave the Van Pelt bathroom, stop for a moment before the door and consider the knob’s sensuous curve, the muted hue of its brass, the intricate network of scratches that line its surface. Capable of such ex-
tended application. Duchamp's ready-mades suggest the following revolutionary consequences. As Arthur Scharf points it, first of all the difference between the artist and the masses ceases to exist, and every man is endowed with the facility of creating beauty (in the case of the Ready-mades, simply by deciding that a common object is to be elevated to the status of a work of art). And secondly, the very distinction between life and art is abolished.

Duchamp throws into doubt the two concepts upon which the traditional humanitarian sanction of art rests—the special "esthetic" qualities of the artwork and the special sensibility of the artist. The total egalitarianism that results, a democracy both people and objects, threatens the conventional order of social and aesthetic hierarchy. Morse Peckham, arriving at similar conclusions in his effort to explode accepted theories of art, writes, "The discovery that anything becomes a work of art if you perceive it as a work of art, and that it can be given public status if you place it in an artistic situation, is, according to some critics and a concerned public, fraught with danger for art." As he has suggested, a way to sidestep the danger posed by the Ready-made is to deny or minimize its formal potential in favor of its symbolic or intellectual potential. In his recent article, Karsten Harré proposes that Duchamp's found objects have reinvented the mainstream of academic modernist art precisely because they subordinate form to content. The importance of the urinal, for instance, lies outside the object's physical presence.

The aesthetic appeal of the object is very limited. It is meaning only as a gesture directed against the established and the accepted. Duchamp himself spoke of provocation. The title, so obviously at odds with what it names, underscores the provocation. Capturing the paradox that Fountain combines revolutionary intentions with some surprisingly traditional tendencies, he goes on to write, 

Like so much modern art, it is first of all art about art... What matters is not the concrete object, but the fact that it has been chosen as the idea governing that choice... The challenge of Duchamp's failure to break the rule of art's approach is clear in retrospect. Object created to provoke and scandalize were canonized.

Fountain is important not as a "concrete object" that levels and demystifies "esthetic" appeal, but as a "gesture" or "idea." Rather than destroying institutional art, it has fathered a long line of conceptual pieces that promote philosophical inquiry into the scholastic tradition--self-reflexive pieces that question the very nature of their own existence as art. The layman claims that anyone could exhibit a urinal on a pedestal, but the artist did it and did it for a reason. This reason becomes the essential distinguishing factor: the readymade is more than a physical object; it has qualities inaccessible to the senses. It can be "daring, impudent, irreversible, witty, and clever," all of which, according to Danto, a commonplace, utilitarian object cannot be. Endorsing his work with meaning, creating a statement about art, the artist works within a conceptual context of aesthetic theory and performativity. Meanwhile, by shifting the ground from form to concept, the conservative has succeeded in maintaining the privileged status of both the artist, who had the delicacy of insight to make such an experiment, and the urinal, which is capable of provoking an intellectual interpretation in ways that a "mere real thing cannot.

Although one might be tempted to think otherwise, the conceptual approach to the readymade does not comprise a bourgeois adulteration of Duchamp's revolutionary intentions. Rather, its roots lie in the artist's own theories. A clear indication of his antithetical impulses appears in a prose piece written in 1946 to explain his painting in the period just prior to the readymade experiments. Fully aware of his radical inclinations, Duchamp vehemently asserts that he did not want to be a "slave to landmarks." He found himself attracted to Dada mainly because it was "serviceable as a purgative." A means of breaking free from a stuffy and restrictive academic institution. Yet the contradiction of Duchamp's statement is an affirmation of traditional, ascendent aesthetic value; as Harries contends, he sees his work as "an attempt to restore to painting its literary dimension, to lead it back to the tradition it had forsaken." For Duchamp, that tradition is specifically religious, or at least spiritual, and painting becomes important to him as it moves away from the physical toward the mental. He writes, 

I wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting. I was much more interested in recreating ideas in painting... For me Courbet had introduced the physical emphasis in the nineteenth century. I was interested in ideas—not merely in visual products. I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind. And my painting was, of course, at once regarded as "intellectual," "literary" painting.

"Reduce, reduce, reduce," he states emphatically, meaning that the physical nature of painting, the heavy impasto characteristic of the realist or impressionist's individualism, should be eliminated in favor of the uncontaminated value of mystical and ineffable ideas. Several of Duchamp's statements express a blatant puritanism, that art should be the embodiment of spirit, and the less body the better.

Dada was an extreme protest against the physical side of painting. It was a metaphysical attitude.

Or, 

This is the direction in which art should turn to: an intellectual expression, rather than an animal expression.

The apparent disgust with the physical; the belief that art can provide a haven untouched by animal limitation; the evocation of a mysterious metaphysics; upon which traditional aesthetic value has depended since the romantics and earlier— all of these elements indicate the rebel's remarkably conservative disposition. Duchamp's attitude toward painting carries over to the readymades which immediately followed. In an interview with Pierre Guérin, Duchamp discusses how he selected the objects to be exhibited, claiming that "you have to approach something with indifference, as if you had no aesthetic emotion. The choice of readymades is always based on visual indifference, and, at the same time, on the total absence of good or bad taste." In this light the motivation behind the readymade is no different from that of the earlier paintings. Having obliterated the physical influence of the senses and the cultural influence of "good or bad taste," presumably the artist is left to a mental state pure and intellectual. He puts the found object "at the service of the mind," the fact that it has been chosen and now bears the meaning of an idea triumphs over its ordinary physical presence. The readymade that so threatens to pull high culture out of its ivory tower and down to the level of the local restroom, falls prey to the same unwarranted assumptions that traditionally sustain high culture. The readymade consoles the curator who displays the disturbing piece with the two age-old humanist adages: art is timeless (bound to "mind") and art is pure (denying its contingencies) and art reflects an underlying human denominator that is universal because it remains free from diverse external influences. Aside from the rhetoric of disinterestedness, there is little reason to believe that the artist is capable of stepping out of his history, stripping away the physical and cultural contingencies that shape human vision, or even that some intellectual essence would remain after such a process. Duchamp's theory is romantic in high Kantian fashion, seeking the permanent spiritual value exempt from all instant influence, a value that must always be a dubious postulate. Yet it is the evocation of this suspiciously conventional value that permits the conservative aesthetician to avoid the formalist implications of the readymade and to focus on its conceptual potential instead.

In one sense, the readymade becomes the perfect vehicle of pure idea—it involves no physical construction. The art-
ist never gets his hands dirty and produces a work of art through a sheer act of will. "Part of the irony of the 'readymades,'" Burnham asserts, "is their very idealism—a consequence of being all idea with no deliberate construction technique on the part of the artist." 19 Again, such a consideration leads away from a formalist interpretation and back to a conceptual one. Duchamp himself writes that the readymade allowed him to "reduce the idea of aesthetic consideration to the choice of the mind, not to the ability or cleverness of the hand (he) objectified in to many manifestos (his) generation." 20 Anticipating Danto's belief that the common object is elevated to the status of art and not vice versa, Duchamp claims that he took the objects "out of the earth" and placed them "onto the planet of aesthetics." While Duchamp's phrase rings with tongue-in-cheek hyperbole, the opposition between a higher aesthetic realm and a lower earthly realm conforms to his notion of pure idea and animal body. The difference between a urinal in the museum's bathroom and a urinal in the museum's modern sculpture gallery is that the latter contains a hidden essence of aesthetic idea and meaning the former entirely lacks. Moreover, the artist has created that idea without any dependence upon vulgar, physical means.

The particular dilemma of the readymade is that it confirms the most oppressively naked formulation of aesthetic theory while it explodes all attempts to contain art within clearly defined boundaries. At the same time that he felt he was placing objects on that exclusive "planet of aesthetics," Duchamp also stressed that the readymades "weren't works of art"; they were objects "to which no art terms applied." 21 Despite such claims, and an undeniable interest in disrupting bourgeois sensibility, Duchamp certainly treated his readymades like artworks. If the readymade was intended to liberate the aesthetic nature of all objects, it is hard to see why Duchamp rigorously decided to limit the number he would produce. Only when they are seen as traditional artworks fraught with meaning can we understand his refusal to indulge in indiscriminate production. "I wanted to protect my Ready-mades," he said, "against such a contamination." 22 Similarly, after many of the original pieces were lost, why did Duchamp supervise the 1964 reproduction of "a signed and number edition of his most important Readymades"? The appearance of the late replicas, and even the notion that the objects could be ranked, in important respects suggests that Duchamp, at least in practice, did indeed consider his readymades artworks in a quite conventional fashion.

If the above activities serve to affirm the privileged nature of the aesthetic object, they also affirm the special role of the artist who created and presented them. Herschel B. Chipp's praise of Duchamp is typical of the retrospective assessment that perceives the readymade primarily as conceptual art.

- Duchamp actually produced very little—a few paintings, drawings, and fragmentary writings; yet his superior intelligence and refined sensibility provided a wealth of associations. His whole life's work is a statement, he did nothing to the object except to present it for contemplation.

The attribution of "superior intelligence and refined sensibility" neatly embeds Duchamp in a tradition that sets the artist, in degree if not kind, above the mass of men. If the readymades possess an egalitarian impulse, that impulse is easily lost; does Fountain suggest that any man can create beauty simply by cleansing the doors of perception, or does it celebrate the exclusive power of the artist's penetrative creativity? Frank Lentricchia aptly summarizes the central paradox that has evolved historically out of contradictory romantic motives.

For all of its demystifying and democratic predispositions toward matters social and aesthetic, at the center of Romantic thought there is always a powerful elitism. This elitism, put forward in the stories of creative genius and various other ideological originality, would claim that artistic activity—by definition something that artists alone may engage in—is the deepest humanizing activity; the difficulty is that "we," mankind at
changed since the early piece, the "art-world" means the conceptual or philosophical basis of art that transcends its physical dimension. He is the first to admit that an "aesthetic" or formal level, "the distinction between artworks and mere artifacts is insurmountable." Therefore, in order to maintain that distinction and prevent art from losing its privileged status, Danto shifts the defining aesthetic characteristics away from the physical and toward the mental. In an earlier article with the same title as his recent book, "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace," Danto compares a simple wooden crate to an identical object constructed (or selected) by an artist. The first is truly empty, but the second contains something—it is content. Danto takes it to belong to a "world of interpreted things." 

Not unlike Dada's planet of aesthetics, this world of interpreted things exists as an objectively isolated realm. Its objects remain distinct from identical moments because of someone's subjective categorization of the thing. For Danto, race because of inherent qualities—namely, the ability to carry aesthetic meaning—in those objects. Learning that an object is a work of art, Danto tells us, "means that its qualities are different from its uninterpreted counterparts, and that our aesthetic responses will be different. And this is not institutional, it is ontological. We are dealing with an altogether different order of things." As we have seen, the attribution of special ontological (and empirically unverifiable) status to works represents the most oppressively conservative aesthetic theory; it immediately shuts the door on revolution and even speculation. If interpretability is the decisive criterion for art, I see no reason why it is inconceivable that someone could find meaning, formal or philosophical, in any urine bottle, or, conversely, why a perfectly intelligent and educated museum-goer might be incapable of finding any meaning whatsoever in Duchamp's Fountain. Yet Danto wants to cut off the possibilities at both ends, declaring once and for all that one object is intrinsically art and the other is not. Despite his humanist intentions, Danto suffers from an almost tyrannical idealism. Art, under his conceptual theory, becomes the exclusive intellectual property of those who can perceive its inherent quality. Danto entirely misses the influence of his own subjective perspective; it is no coincidence that the philosopher believes art to be art's foremost quality and consequently privileges art's theoretical nature. In a revealing passage, Danto states that certain Pop paintings by Lichtenstein, 

These paintings are deeply theoretical works, self-conscious to such a degree that it is difficult to know how much of the material core they must be reckoned in as part of the artwork; self-conscious are they, indeed, that they almost exemplify a Hegelian ideal in which matter is transfigured into spirit, in this case there being hardly an element of the material counterpart which may not be a candidate for an element in the artwork itself.

For Danto, objects become art to the degree that their physical nature dissolves into purely philosophical ideas, and he falls prey to the Hegelian paradox which insists that the body and all of its contingencies must be transcended as art evolves into spirit. To place the essence of art in theory is to cut off most people from art and to perpetuate an elite academy. As in the book’s preface, Danto strives to discover the distinguishing characteristics of art that elevate it above the whirling tinsel of the mundane—the permanent center of theory exempt from the influence of earthly change. In order to do so, he knows that he must account for the endless cycles of revolt that comprise the history of art, especially the recent movements initiated by Duchamp that seem to defy the very barrier between art and artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain institution (the artworld).

As with Danto, the physical characteristics of an object are relatively unimportant to Dickie, though he locates the essence of art not in the art but in an unseen social framework. Art becomes the product of a certain type of social behavior. "When I call the artworld an institution," Dickie writes, "I am saying that it is an established practice." He never makes explicit, however, whether this "established practice" is to remain or in particular to a certain cultural group and his failure to specify the definition marks one of its chief weaknesses. While avoiding the issue of cultural diversity—"It would be enough to be able to specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept of art which we are (or are we)—Dickie insists that his description of the art world defines art without falling into the conservative aesthetic ideology that has handcuffed creativity in the past. Of the many problems involved with a definition that seeks to maintain primacy from behind its bases on the nature of art, I will briefly focus on a few considerations relevant to Duchamp and the readymades.

Like Danto, Dickie makes the perplexing readymade the central example of his theory, claiming that "Dadaism...must eventually strike at the institutional essence of art." The importance he sees in the readymade is that it brings out an "established practice" of the art world that was previously unnoticed—the conferring of the status of art upon an object. According to Dickie, this behavior always constituted a social criterion for art, but in traditional aesthetics it was accepted without question. In the act of painting or sculpting the artist automatically conferred the status of art upon his creation. When, however, the objects are bizarre, Dickie tells us, 

as those of the Dadaists are, our attention is forced away from the objects' obvious properties. 

A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an
to a consideration of the objects in their social context. As works of art Duchamp's 'readymades' may not be worth much, but as examples of art they are very valuable for art theory.41

Once again we see the critic shift away from a formal interpretation of the readymade to a conceptual one, absorbing the work into a realm of theory (here, social theory) that subordinates its revolutionary impulse. Danto uses Duchamp to confirm the ongoing philosophical framework of art by focusing on the theoretical implications of the readymades; Dickie uses him to confirm a perpetual social framework of art in like manner. "I am not claiming," he writes, "that Duchamp and friends invented the conferring of the status of art; they simply used an existing institutional device in an unusual way..." Danto did not invent the artworld, because it was there all along.42 Although their art worlds are different, both Dickie and Danto seek the underlying institutional substratum that unites the diverse array of works of art and keeps them distinct from nonartistic objects. On the surface, Dickie's social approach seems to provide a definition that leaves open the possibilities of art in a way that philosophers like Weitz and Kennick thought impossible. Liberal claims such as the following permeate his writing:

Since under the definition anything whatever may become art, the definition imposes no restraints on creativity.43

In addition, every person who sees himself as a member of the artworld is thereby a member.44 Dickie attempts to avoid the exclusive elitism which developed out of previous definitions of art that posited some privileged "aesthetic" quality as the distinguishing criterion. Here, anything can be art and anyone can act as artist. But as William Blizikz acutely observes, Dickie implies throughout that the art world is more limited than he definition ideally suggests.45 For instance, who actually comprises the art world and confers the status of art upon objects? Dickie responds,

The core personnel of the artworld is a loosely organized, though not unimportant, set of people who include artists, art historians, art critics, writers, composers, producers, utensil makers, and others. These are the people who keep the artworld from falling apart and thereby provide for its continuing existence. Although I have called the persons who maintain the artworld, they are not necessarily allowed to enter the circle and share in the power they enjoy there.

Furthermore, can anyone actually be on behalf of the artworld? In his study of art institutions, Becker demonstrates that "artworld" is an indexical concept, based on the existential, social, and economic context. The "open" concept of art based on social relationships becomes as arbitrary as any other definition, suggesting the need for a more conservative nature of the artworld that is more clearly defined.

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The name of this implies the Institutional Theory of Art, in Danto's or Dickie's formulation, marks a conservative effort to organize the aesthetic experience that is at least confusingly diverse and perhaps outright chaotic. Both versions of the theory limit the range of our responses to art by selecting a single characteristic as the decisive classifying criterion. Both versions manage to account for the Duchamp readymade in a way that reinforces an already-present institution and excludes the revolutionary potential that would disrupt that institution. Yet the many sides of the readymade that are ignored or appreciated act as testimony against the possibility of aesthetic definition. No matter what type of approach one takes, the readymade has a paradoxical alternative that refutes the approach. If one sanctions its conceptual nature and thus hopes to continue a traditional history of aesthetic philosophy, one must confront the deconstructive quality of the idea it carries, an idea that denies precisely the desired traditional history. If one accepts the readymade's social nature, one must confront its leveling formal potential that renders social context negligible. It is not mandatory to act on behalf of the art world to find formal satisfaction in any urinal. And finally, sanctioning the formal approach does not necessarily lead to revolutionary equality among all objects and people. As we have seen, it is just as possible that this mere real thing, this urinal or potter's wheel, has been figured by a special mind into the elite realm of art. No matter what he intended with his experiment, Duchamp created a Chinese box of unaccountable paradoxes. Like Keats' Urn, the readymade teases us out of thought. For whatever explanation or interpretation we can propose, it always sports a contradictory answer, leaving an elusive portion of itself outside the boundaries of any definition of art.

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4 Danto, pp. 93-4.
5 Ibid., p. 394.
7 Ibid., pp. 93-4.
8 Chipp, pp. 95-6.
9 Ibid., p. 393.
10 Ibid., p. 394.
11 Ibid., pp. 395.
12 Ibid., p. 395
icism and Countertheses

PERCEPTION, MEANING, AND CONVENTION

I find myself in major agreement with David Blinder’s article, “The Controversy over Conceptualism” (Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, XLII, no. 3 [1983]). He presents a phenomenological approach to expressive meaning closely akin to my own position, and I would like to pursue the topic a bit further.

Properly understood, that approach is an alternative to what Blinder labels “the denotative theory of meaning.” The latter has at least one merit: it validates the referential function of art by offering a parapet against the formalist theory of art. According to the formalists, art was merely sui-referential: each of the arts could define its essence—e.g., picturality, literariness, and so on—and strive toward realizing that essence without ever making reference to external reality as such. Malraux explained that a composer becomes a painter not by listening to birds, but by listening to musical pieces. So any art as such is a closed system, and the only way to receive a work is to give it its place and its function within the system. The system determines the art’s sense just as a sentence does a word’s. Thus, for the formalists searching for a bedeutung, that is, for something which the sign designates, is needless. To produce a work is merely to play with the signifiers, structuring and destroying them, without using them as signs.

The denotative theory of meaning, on the other hand, admits that artistic signs have a bedeutung. Pictorial symbols say something of the world just as words do, but more efficiently than words, since their speaking is a showing. But while art is conceived as language, language is conceived as an institution, running thesei, not physei. It is a product of culture.

Moreover, as a system, the pictorial symbols constitute a screen or a grid through which we view whatever the artist has designated or represented. Conceptualism and constructionism go hand in hand. It is often said that we only perceive the world what language allows us to say; what has no name slips through the net of perception. Similarly, we grasp the “nature” figurative arts intend to represent only through the instruments of artistic representation—lines, volumes, colors, values, relief. And these conventions vary from one epoch to another, just as languages vary from one country to the next. Moreover, to understand such a representation, the viewer has to learn to “read” the appropriate set of conventions. The inability of certain aborigines to pick out what a photograph pictures illustrates this.

So something always stands as a mediator between us and the world: as language relates us to the given, artistic conventions link us to the represented. Without direct access to reality, we always stand at the distance of representation. (This space forbids any philosophy of presence.) But it does not prevent our making the representation of (the object) subordinate to the subject, or rather to what today replaces the transcendental subject—language and culture. As Blinder reminds us, Goodman says: “That nature imitates art is too timid a dictum. Nature is the product of art and discourse.” So the denotative theory of meaning grants art a referential function, and for bids us to say with the formalists that art refers only to itself. The world it refers to is only a world it itself produces.

The denotative theory, then, spawns a version of idealism, and it is as an alternative to