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$6.00/Summer 1986

Published by the MIT Press
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Ready-Made Originals:  
The Duchamp Model*

It seems incredible that it is in the name of free instruction that they come along today to forbid us to see masterpieces; and what do they give us instead? Cubes, cones, hexagons, tetrahedrons, polyhedrons, the group of them looking like a cemetery. They made the great draughtsman [Ingres] say, "My poor children, they have placed you before your tombstones and then forced you to copy them!"—Balze

The modern model of repetition has been established well outside the avant-garde. It is usually called mass production and is recognized in the commodity, that dull fetish, the brand-name good, the ideal of middlemen. Though we tend to consider this kind of repetition unbearably crude, it has nonetheless become the unwritten point of reference for all other definitions of the copy, not to say the original. As a point of reference it is hardly abstract: mass production is a daily real; more than a flood of exchange values, it is powerful, essential, basic. The mass-produced model of repetition has perhaps been forced upon us, but we cannot take it lightly; it deserves our attention here.

There is, it must be admitted, a play of variation within this brute repetition: the industrial model is neither monolithic nor all that crude. There are, for example, the historical shifts in what is understood by the word commodity. There are, for another example, the deviations and interferences made by politicians and industrialists to favor the development of certain sectors over others. The mass-produced repetition is not, bang-bang, mechanical: it con-

* This symposium contribution has benefited from the careful reading and good criticism of Leila Kinney, Michael Marrinan, and André Rouillé. As ever, they have my thanks.
tains longings for individual greatness, dreams of national prosperity, and fears of loss. These variations make for a model of repetition that is neither very simple nor easy to use. Possibly for these reasons, as well as for the others I've just mentioned, it is rarely proposed as a model for culture to follow.

At one stage in the history of industry, it displayed a culture for itself, rather than, as became to be the case, using another kind of culture to represent its interests. This happened in the nineteenth century, when mass production, often with the help of the state, organized trade fairs, culminating in the world’s fairs. The fairs drew attention to themselves like magnets; they easily rivaled traditional forms of culture and in many ways brought on their competition’s demise. They exhibited models of modern, national cultures; they claimed to exhibit the future, natural evolution of man. They proposed a grand, new culture of the patent that quite overshadowed the culture of the copyright.

This display of futures and cultures provoked much debate over the way to industrial supremacy. The debate in nineteenth-century France led, somewhat surprisingly, to a call for drawing. According to Fernand Buisson, then director of primary school education, the call came from diverse sectors, from workers and management, special commissions, and chambers of commerce, and it saw drawing as the salvation of French industry; he saw it as social capital. A better instruction in drawing was theorized; with the Ferry reforms in public school education in the early 1880s, it became law, integrated into a program of basic, compulsory civic knowledge.

The cycles of this curriculum led to another order of repetition, one designed to justify the nation and its industrial mode of production. This made for a closed system, a wheel within a wheel, where a social and political order was justified and justifying, as Gramsci observed about the contemporary Italian reforms. One was taught to regard this schooled knowledge as absolutely objective when in fact nature was being mastered according to a particular scheme of social order which was facilitating a particular idea of work. Work, said Gramsci, was the latent principle in the Italian primary school. It was embedded, in a slightly different form, in the French school too. Drawing was taught as one such given, full of the latent idea of work; at the same time, it was taught as a piece of the hexagone, a common sense, and a tool by which one ordered visual experience. It was taught through drills, like writing, and taken as language, to be read, as it were, and spoken. In this secondary, drawn, silent, massive, classroom repetition, we can begin to fathom the deeper machinations of the original, industrially produced model with which we began.

The drawing instruction was designed by Eugène Guillaume, who was fond of explaining his method as the instrument for the establishment of drawing as a regular language; he was not, however, promoting the teaching of art. As he put it:

Drawing expresses the most sublime notions of artists; it is the starting point and the last word of the painter’s, sculptor’s, and architect’s masterpiece; and at the same time it is a means of communication and a practical instrument used by the worker-artist and the artisan. If it has its poetics; it also has in some respects its business language. But all this is but a single language which rests upon certain formal principles and rules, these having a grammatical character.

These rules were grounded in and expressed by geometry. The geometric language base installed by the Ferry reforms and taught by the Guillaume method could be built upon later for different professional purposes, like art or industrial design, but that was not the educators’ first concern. They wanted to guarantee an elementary, which is to say as yet unprofessional but still workaday visual language for daily use; they hoped that the entire population would be able to read geometrical and mechanical drawing, a skill they deemed necessary for modern life. The language base they set up was primary, aesthetically neutral, and cut to fit a particular idea of the visual.

The program as it was instituted in 1883 remained in effect, with minor adjustments, for the next twenty-six years. It began by teaching the student the straight and the curved line, explaining that the entire world of appearances was built upon combinations of these two elements: they were the first letters of the alphabet. The relations between the lines were studied too: the relationships, one manual said, were the syllables of drawing. The tableaux illustrated here (figs. 1, 2) come from Ris-Paquot’s manual for teachers in 1887 and summarize the progression of the program, how the broken line was extended into its original, industrially produced model with which we began.

3. The hexagone is a trope for the French nation, whose borders form a rough hexagon.
Fig. 1. Ris-Paquot, Enseignement primaire, 1887. Fig. 2. Pl. 14, study of trapezoids.

Fig. 3. V. Darchez, cylinder from Nouveaux exercices de dessin, 1888.

Fig. 5. Pl. 30, acanthus leaf and Ionic capital. Fig. 6. V. Darchez, head from Nouveaux exercises de dessin, 1888.

Fig. 4. Application, 500 g. weight, from same notebook belonging to Henri Jeannotte.
cornices and T squares, how the combination into trapezoids led to the formation of watering cans and shoes. The student went on to master the figures of plane geometry, and then to those of solids. Simple drawing after decorative ornament was tried but there was no drawing after nature in the raw. The geometry moved in its own sphere, according to its own elemental logic. The figures of plane and solid geometry led to instruction in perspective and then to the introduction of projection drawing, on which mechanical drawing was based. This was achieved by laborious copying in notebooks: by the repetition of the cylinder, the cone, and the sphere, in their pure form and in their other guises. One can see the child laboring in the notebooks that survive, here Henri Jeannotte doing the lesson on the cylinder, the cone, and the sphere, in plan and elevation (fig. 3); at times there was resistance, for Jeannotte at the point of the 500 gram weight, when, defying all limits, he let a speeding car invade the page (fig. 4). But mainly, the surviving notebooks show conformity, not to mention an extraordinary skill with the very straight line. The program continued. It took the student through the architectural orders, did the vases and balusters, and ended with the human head (figs. 5, 6). The visual set of the program was colorless, technical, and relentlessly geometrical. In the secondary schools, the lessons were extended: the drawing became ever more technical and exacting: there were copies after the antique and calculations of cast shadows. Once the student had passed puberty, the human body could be drawn, but never from life. These, in short, were the limits in this visual common sense.

The projections and perspectives were critical. The child was learning that there were two kinds of representation: drawing that imitated the appearance of things to the naked eye and drawing that revealed the truth of things behind the surfaces of appearance; that is to say, there was perspective drawing and mechanical drawing. Each kept a relation to the object; one could have a coffee grinder both ways (fig. 7), but truth, significantly, was not optical. It was, rather, nonretinal, and clearly identified with the croquis coti, the blueprint for production, the working drawing for the commodity. In practice, the language base was hardly neutral; it cheerfully ratified the means and ends of industrial production; insofar as it was a language for everyday use, it was a language of work, a language of industry.
At the heart of the program sat the object of everyday life, or better, objects, which were named and described in the certification for drawing teachers and repeated (fig. 8), without actually being specified individually, in the manuals used in the schools. They were household objects and tools usually: tables, pails, flowerpots, frying pans, rakes, trestles, umbrellas. By and large, this elementary education was successful: the coffee grinder’s appearance and being were registered by children and graded by teachers. The full implications of the normative lesson on the commodity and its required geometrical form were probably not grasped by the nine- to twelve-year-olds who received it; they were simply assumed; they came with literacy. And with literacy came another order of repetition, the kind of repetition that is called use.

This language in use does not take its textbook form, of course. It is best considered speech, and sometimes it just popped out (fig. 9). As Marcel Duchamp told Pierre Cabanne:

My brother had a kitchen in his little house in Puteaux, and he had the idea of decorating it with pictures by his buddies. He asked Gleizes, Metzinger, La Frenaye, and, I think, Léger, to do some little paintings of the same size, like a sort of frieze. He asked me too, and I did a coffee grinder which I made to explode; the coffee is tumbling down beside it, the gear wheels are above, and the knob is seen simultaneously at several points in its circuit, with an arrow to indicate movement. Without knowing it, I had opened a window onto something else. The arrow was an innovation that pleased me a lot—the diagrammatic aspect was interesting....It was a sort of loophole....It was there I began to think I could avoid all contact with traditional pictorial painting....

In fact, Duchamp had switched into the neutral, utilitarian mode of representation that he had learned along with everybody else, though it would seem not to have been a conscious decision. The coffee grinder is painted in cross section and from above, maintaining the points of view of the mechanical drawing. It is a variation that ends up as a repetition; it moves through the loophole to the coffee grinder; a slip of the tongue produced one of the most common textbook objects of everyday life. As Duchamp abandoned easel painting, he lapsed into the language of industry, slipped back onto a ready-made base, one with a technical, nonart edge, pretentions to language, a nonretinal dimension, projections, and cast shadows. The notes for the Large Glass and the assortment of objects that accompanied its making are concerned to define and explore all of these things further. Duchamp by no means reproduced his elementary education; rather he used it against the interrogation by the shop window and its contents, commodities.

Duchamp wrote in a note to himself in 1913:

When one is interrogated by shop windows, one is also pronouncing one’s own sentence. In fact, the choice is a round trip. From the demands of the shop windows, from the inevitable response to the shop windows, comes the end of choice. No obstinacy, out of absurdity, hiding the coitus through the glass with one or more objects from this shop window. The sentence consists in cutting through the glass and in regretting it once possession is gained. Q.E.D.

Consumption is predetermined; consumption is regrettable since one cannot avoid becoming possessed by these objects; consumption can be demonstrated using geometry (Q.E.D.). Whatever his reservations about consummation, Duchamp did submit to the interrogation and he answered back. But he tried in his answer to break away from the mandatory round trip, to remain self-possessed in front of the windowpane. He took to symbolic violence rather than vandalism; in 1915 he bought a snow shovel and named it In Advance of the Broken Arm (fig. 10). It was a logical move, a self-defense, and a reply in the appropriate native tongue.

The ready-mades and the assisted ready-mades sometimes duplicate the object lessons of the Guillaume method (fig. 11) and sometimes extrapolate from them; at the very least, Duchamp always chose objects that come from the same generic family studied in the object lesson. They seem to have been plucked from a distant mechanical drawing in the mind, though they carry the textbook example to an adult conclusion: they produce the object from the drawing. In this reproduction came a literal possession of the object and its language. In the ready-mades, Duchamp seized control of the dialogue dictated by the shop window: the model is taken out of circulation, often given an absurd title, hung

7. For typical examples, see L. Malaval, Le vrai dessin. Cours pratique de perspective à vue. A l’usage de toute personne qui veut apprendre à dessiner d’après nature avec ou sans maitre, Paris, Nouvelle Librairie classique, 1888; and the various manuals for teachers and students by V. Darchez. It should be noted that the certifying exam for the teaching of drawing instituted in 1887 specified a set of objects to be learned and that the objects for men differed from those for women.

8. Marcel Duchamp, Dialogues with Pierre Cabanne, trans. Ron Padgett, New York, Viking, 1971, pp. 31 and 37. The language is used in many corners of French culture. Its presence can be detected, for instance, in the fact that the generation of Frenchmen who grew up in the 1880s and 90s came to recognize merit in geometric abstract art. It probably allowed the work on the forth dimension, dependent upon an understanding of projection, to be of sufficient popular interest to become a fad. It affected the way in which advertisers developed a mass-media image for the commodity. And it provided a base for French modernism, dada, purism, and surrealism, to use after World War I as it sought to make sense of the culture of consumption, of those commodities that were competing with art. Its assumptions reappear in Ozanam’s theory, Léger’s Ballet mécanique, and the objet trouvé, as well as the ready-made.

in a limbo, and effectively silenced. This shovel will never be used, bent, rusted, or fall obsolete. And yet, Duchamp was not behaving as badly as little Henri. The language of industry was not dismissed out of hand but, rather, assumed and then subjected, sentenced to an ambiguous zone of Duchamp's own choosing. Duchamp was careful, however, to point out that originally it was never a question of condemning the ready-mades to art.

The ready-made, then, was a response to a condition of everyday life. It was articulated through the visual set of the Guillaume method; it demonstrated Duchamp's literacy in the visual language of the quotidian. As a response, it fits perfectly into Voloshinov's description of everyday discourse, where the banal comment gains its meaning from a range of unspoken social conditions, a horizon that grounds the empty phrase.10 Voloshinov's example takes two men.

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One says, "Voile" (I have used a French translation). The other says nothing. By itself the voile is empty. But if one knows that it is May and that the two, presumably Russian men are standing by a window watching the snow fall before their very eyes and feeling a certain gloom, the voile speaks worlds. The shovel is a voile, a perfectly ordinary response in 1915 to a hardware store on Broadway, a purchase. It is an empty, banal thing that requires a native French speaker to get the non-dit, the snowfall, in it. The shovel is legible but closed: it is not a voile to be countered with another, like phrase, say, a depressed "Mais oui." The shovel leads nowhere in the terms of everyday discourse, except to a monologue by Duchamp.

Duchamp's unpoetic monologue on everyday visual experience was strung out over the series of ready-mades, a succession of voiles. In themselves they say nothing much; their interest lies in Duchamp's use of the language. For Duchamp is attempting to master not only the commodity but also its means of communication, its language. If mastered, he would have the symbolic means of industry under his personal control.

In 1920 Duchamp pretended to have done just that in the Fresh Widow (fig. 12), another object-type of the instruction, this one part of the required curriculum in the lycée by the time Duchamp attended (fig. 13).11 Here we know that there is this very working drawing lodged somewhere in his memory, a design that reappeared twenty years later with a few details missing: the French has gone fresh; the window is a widow; the panes are made of leather; and it has been translated into English. The design was given to an American carpenter to get this small-scale model in blue. So the design is repeated and manufactured like a model for a patent office. It makes a joke at the expense of the French war widow. But this time around, Duchamp has inserted a bona fide word that takes the visual language into another order of discourse: the Fresh Widow is declared copyrighted by Duchamp's alias, Rose Selavy. The claim to copyright brings the interrogation by the shop window to a different halt: Duchamp has claimed a copyright for a window that is not only plagiarized but by definition not eligible for copyright: the window is an industrial good in the eyes of the law; if suitably innovative it might be patented but never given the droit d'auteur, not even in America. The copyright was a bluff. But with it, Duchamp subjugated the culture of the patent in no uncertain terms: by means of that one word, he pulled the culture of the patent over into the culture of copyright, the traditional culture, the culture of artists. In spite of all his efforts to remain com-
In a well-known letter written in the last months of his life, Claude Monet sought to discourage precisely the sort of discussion that I will offer here. To the biographer of his old friend and associate John Singer Sargent, Monet writes of his "horror of theories," and yet inevitably Monet engages in theory in his own further remarks: "My only merit lies in having painted directly in front of nature, seeking to render my impressions of the most fleeting effects, and I still very much regret having caused the naming of a group whose majority had nothing impressionist about it" (to Evan Charteris, June 21, 1926, w. 2626). In this disavowal of the group name, Monet very nearly identifies impressionism with his practice alone, this being a sort of police action by which a certain class of fugitive is arrested in mid-flight. The juridical form of this rendering, this surrender of the fugitive, is the notorious impression itself; and the ritual precinct for this visual remanding is "directement devant la nature."

"Devant" not only means "in front of" but also somewhat less directly suggests "prior to," and it is the unruly indices of temporal anteriority and spatial alterity that are repressed in this version of Monet’s account. In an earlier letter, however, this one written to his own biographer, Monet acknowledges the ontological priority of another’s vision over the phenomenological immediacy of his own:

As to what concerns my relations with the "king of skies" I think that

I would like to thank Rosalind Krauss for inviting me to participate in the 1986 College Art Association symposium on originality as repetition, and to acknowledge the enabling force of her own remarks on repetition found throughout her essays collected in The Originality of the Ant-Inde and Other Modernist Myths, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, The MIT Press, 1985. I would further like to thank the Committee on Interpretation at Bryn Mawr College for its vigorous reading of an earlier version of this paper.