Pissing on Duchamp: Interactivity Gets the Firehose

"All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act."

-Marcel Duchamp, April 1957

"…[O]n 21 May, [Yuan Cai and Jian Jun Xi] … made a contribution to Marcel Duchamp's seminal work, the Fountain, a factory-made urinal he chose to autograph in 1917 and call art. Cai and Xi urinated on it for over a minute, their contribution kept away from Duchamp's porcelain by the work's Perspex case."

-Nick Paton Walsh, June 2000 (for The Observer)

Like an Eastern Bloc refugee driving a New York City cab while his worthless medical degree collects dust at home, Marcel Duchamp's urinal was stripped of its intended social purpose and left to live out its days in existential mire. Perhaps we *should* praise Yuan Cai and Jian Jun Xi, these momentary liberators of a conflicted urinal, for at least now *La Fontaine* knows that it is still fit to serve. With a golden stream of answers, the two Chinese-born artists rather boldly resumed the dialogue Duchamp began in 1917 when he first presented the work. In spite of the Tate gallerists' outrage over the incident, one can imagine Marcel would have approved – he, himself, proposed using a Rembrandt as an ironing board. The potential for meaningful, (though not necessarily desirable) destructive interaction exists in every work of art.

In their act of urination, Cai and Xi materialized the (typically) internal dialogue between artist and spectator that Duchamp trumpeted in his 1957 lecture, "The Creative Act." Anticipating Roland Barthes, he described a two-part construction of meaning in art: first, being the artist's original intent and, second, being the unintentional meaning ascribed to a work by its audience. Thus, while some critics condemned Cai and Xi for misunderstanding *La Fontaine*, the duo could justify the action with the laconic explanation, "The urinal is there – it's an invitation." This tongue-in-cheek subjectivity perhaps betrays a stronger understanding of Duchamp's theoretical teachings than their detractors might afford them.

French art critic, Nicolas Bourriaud, believes that Duchamp's lecture was among the most powerful and sophisticated assertions that interactivity in art far precedes the era of gadgets, gizmos, and screens (*Relational Aesthetics*, 44). Lev Manovich, in *The Language of New Media*, takes similar aim: "All classical, and even moreso modern, art is 'interactive' in a number of ways. Ellipsis in literary narration, missing details of objects in visual art, and other representational 'shortcuts' require the user to fill in missing information" (56). Cai and Xi's atypical interaction is noteworthy because it favored physical form over the cerebral, making tangible the audience's contribution to the creative work.

There are, of course, regrettable, if not dangerous, aspects inherent to this method of interaction. This becomes especially clear if we return, for instance, to the Rembrandt ironing board, or the very real blue vomit that Jubal Brown issued forth upon a Mondrian at the Art Gallery of Ontario, or Gerard Jan van Bladeren's 1986 slashing of Barnett Newman's "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?" at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Cai and Xi's stunt seems harmless in comparison but one must recognize that the impulse driving these actions can be one and the same as that which leads fascists to burn books. I emphasize their methodology here only because it represents a generally ignored interactive practice that threatens widely adopted notions of 'Interactive Art.'

Unfortunately, definitions of 'Interactive Art' offered by many of the primer texts on new media, for lack of a better term, fail to account for such possibilities. We can take Frank Popper's *Art of the Electronic Age* as one example of this misdirected group. Popper argues that an 'interactive artist' tries "to stimulate a two-way interaction between his works and the spectator, a process that becomes possible only through the new technological devices that create a situation in which questions by the user/spectator are effectively answered by the art work itself" (8). Beyond his insistence on the work's dependence on 'technological devices,' this definition inexplicably limits the role of an art work to that which answers questions rather than raises them. Obviously, this flies in the face of Duchamp's theory of constructed meaning. It implies that the user/spectator cannot provide any answers him or herself. It disallows Cai and Xi to assert, "You are a urinal. See? I am going to piss on you," which was one of many acceptable answers to the questions raised by *La Fontaine*. And, again, their engagement with the work was interactive without being bound to any technology per se. It was quite simply a realization of the potential that was always there.

Randall Packer and Ken Jordan, in *Multi-Media: From Wagner to Virtual Reality*, define interactivity as "the ability of the user to manipulate and affect her experience of media directly" (xxxv). They elaborate, "Reading a text is *not* an interactive experience; interactivity implies changing the words of the text in some way — adding to them, reorganizing them, engaging with them in a way that affects their appearance on a screen" (xxxvi, emphasis mine). They might thus see the Burroughs-Gysin cut-up method as interactive, but would differ with Manovich, Duchamp, Roland Barthes, Stanley Fish, and many others over the inherent interactivity of reading/viewing any creative work, even text on paper. Yet still they concede that interactivity is "an overused word in danger of losing its meaning." In this instance, they seem not to see the forest for the trees.

Manovich clearly disregards the term 'interactivity' as being "too broad to be truly useful" (55). Indeed, the term is overused precisely because interactivity, be it cerebral *or physical*, is an inherent – if invisible — characteristic of the work of art. Yuan Cai and Jian Jun Xi have done us the favor of harmlessly demonstrating the potential for interactivity's physical manifestations within works created long before the era of 'Interactive Art.' With this understanding, we can either work toward a new definition or lay the bothersome category to rest once and for all. If we choose the latter, perhaps we ought to let the ball continue to roll over the countless other inept terms that describe the

various currents of 'new media' work (and let that one be the first). For if useful insight can be gained through destructive engagement with art, perhaps its vocabulary could use a shower as well.

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