Not Objects so Much As Images
A Response to Graham Harman’s “Greenberg, Duchamp, and the Next Avant-Garde”

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I want to start by making some comments on what you have written in your essay on Clement Greenberg and Marcel Duchamp, Graham. I was especially interested because I have also written about these two figures in my book Pop or Populus: Art between High and Low.¹ I want to say first of all that your paper is dense and complex, but ultimately open-ended and speculative. And this is what makes it exciting.

As I see it, you are taking Greenberg’s criticism as a model that might once again be interesting or relevant, not because of his strict emphasis on formalism, but because he is known to us as the art critic who decreed what was right and what was wrong, and who therefore tried to predict what was to come next in art, or what should or should not be the next step. His judgments were moralistic, e.g. calling Wassily Kandinsky a dangerous influence for young artists, or describing Duchamp as a dead end. So, essentially you are looking to this viewpoint as a kind of inspiration, and then posing the question yourself

¹ Bettina Funcke, Pop or Populus: Art between High and Low (New York: Sternberg Press, 2009); see in particular chapters 1 and 2.
of what might come next and how we might get to this next step in the evolution of art and its criticism.

You write, "Over the past decade, there has been a growing sense that Greenberg is becoming readable once again, while Duchamp’s legacy was perhaps on the verge of becoming overexploited." And this is maybe because Greenberg was writing from what he saw as a point of exhaustion; in his view Duchamp was entirely played out and we needed to find a new direction. He was seeing land art, conceptual art, and minimal art as basically bankrupt derivatives of Duchamp. That may not be something that we agree with now, but it may be that, forty years later, we can finally sort of come to the same conclusions as Greenberg: OK, you were not right about the art of the 1970s, but now we have caught up with you, because now everything feels exhausted to us, too. And we recognise, of course, that this feeling of exhaustion, that things have been overexploited, is perennial.

I still would not necessarily agree that the period since the 1960s is a neo-Dada period, i.e., Duchampian, because I think that view, which was Greenberg’s, leaves out the influence of Andy Warhol, whom he could not really deal with, and who shifted the terrain again. But then again Warhol, like Duchamp, is another strain of art whose legacy may be over-exploited, as you put it.

So, I cannot give an answer to the question of what is coming next, but I want to contribute to the discussion by coming from a slightly different angle, which is to fill in another side of Duchamp’s work which, I think, has really come to influence the art of the last few decades, more so than the readymade in fact. This is his play with information and documentation, with the very reception of his own work, through printed and editioned representations. It is an interference into art history. This is something that basically falls outside of Greenberg’s investigation, and is not really addressed by the 6-point critique that you mention. Just to recap those points:

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Duchamp rejects quality or taste; is primarily interested in shock value; uses transgressive material; privileges the concept; overestimates his own radicality; and is an academic artist who takes his medium for granted.

The thing is, these points of critique seem to make sense only as long as we focus on the readymades and other objects as objects per se, ignoring their context, their discourse, their perverse histories, and everything that Duchamp worked so hard to put into place, a practice which is now much more common because of his work. As an example, let’s take a look at the most famous (and as such the most exhausted) readymade: the Fountain.

Few people saw the original Fountain in 1917. Like almost all the readymades, the original had gone missing, its dimensions never even recorded. Never exhibited, and lost or destroyed almost immediately, the Fountain was actually created through Duchamp’s media manipulations rather than through the creation-myth of his hand selecting it in the showroom, the status-conferring (and, for Greenberg, would-be shocking) gesture to which the readymades are often reduced. A week after the Society of Independent Artists refused to exhibit the work, Duchamp transported the urinal to Alfred Stieglitz’s 291 Gallery, where Stieglitz photographed it under theatrical lighting in front of an expressionist painting. This is the only remaining visual trace of the original Fountain. This photograph has been reproduced in countless publications, and also served as the model for the edition of Fountain produced in 1964 by Arturo Schwarz, in collaboration with Duchamp. A critical commentary on the work, which, apart from the photographic reproduction, is all that allows for its inscription into what we might call the archive, appeared a month later without attribution in the second and final issue of The Blind Man, a journal published not coincidentally by Duchamp. So the object disappears, but its semi-fictional documentation and narrative produced a guarantee, a shortcut to history through photography and writing.

With the original lost, the questions of what is a copy, what is an editioned object, and wherein the authorisation of ex-
Executing a work lies, are raised for the first time and remain complex and ambiguous. For example, the Fountain’s entry in the catalogue raisonné, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, lists and depicts next to the original three additional urinals
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that embody later versions of the work. Next to the original is one Sidney Janis selected in 1950 in Paris at the request of the artist; then there is one from 1963, selected by Ulf Linde for Duchamp’s retrospective at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm; and, last, there is the 1964 edition of eight replicas produced under the artist’s supervision from the photo by Stieglitz.

In Fountain’s elegant model, the artwork does not occupy a single position in space and time; rather, it is a palimpsest of gestures, presentations, and positions, as Seth Price suggests in his essay Dispersion. He writes:

Duchamp distributed the notion of the Fountain in such a way that it became one of art’s primal scenes; it transubstantiated from a provocative objet d’art into, as Broodthaers defined his Musée des Aigles: “a situation, a system defined by objects, by inscriptions, by various activities…”

In short: it turned art into discourse. Duchamp made sure to photograph the original, to publicise it, to archive it, and then to totally twist the trail. Had anyone previously done such work with copies and editions within the realm of high art?

Once art defines itself as an activity primarily manifested in the larger domain of distribution, it encounters new and illuminating problems, as in the case of Duchamp’s editions of his readymades created with Arturo Schwarz. Things declared to be readymades were, mere decades later, no longer industrially produced, or had become untraceable. The objects in question thus had to be reconstructed by hand and at great expense from sketches or photographs. The 1964 edition of Fountain was reproduced by a Milanese ceramicist with the aid of Stieglitz’s photograph of the original. After Duchamp had authorised the designs for the copies, the “genuine copies of the readymades” were now—nearly forty years after they had been selected from among ordinary objects—seemingly

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conventional sculptures, handcrafted to imitate mass-produced articles. As Martha Buskirk has noted:

For the readymades, Duchamp had developed new ways of establishing authorship that would operate in tandem with their testing of the boundaries of the work of art. If Duchamp's initial gesture of choosing the readymade referred to mass production, the later forms of reproduction through which the readymades cycled secured their status as art.⁵

From 1930 to 1940, Duchamp spent his creative energy mainly on the reconstruction of miniature replicas of earlier works. Most of the pieces from that period took the form of multiples: *La boîte-en-valise* (an edition of 300, completed in 1941) included miniature replicas of the readymades, reproductions of the works in glass or celluloid, collotype prints of the paintings, drawings, and commercial prints (some black-and-white, others hand-coloured), as well as photographs of the readymades, of the optical apparatus, and of Duchamp's studio, all manipulated in various ways. In order to reproduce some of them, he had to visit his collectors and take notes. The notes in Duchamp's 1934 *Green Box*, in an edition of 300, were thought to be the only extant notes about *The Large Glass*. Duchamp, however, had more. In 1966, thirty-two years after publishing *The Green Box*, he produced *The White Box* or *À l’infinitif* in an edition of 150, which contained additional notes. These were translated and typographically transferred into English by Richard Hamilton and Ecke Bonk, a so-called typotranslation published as a book in 1967, also under the authorisation of Duchamp.

I want to stop and point out that all these examples do not invalidate Greenberg's critiques. Obviously Greenberg would have seen all of this as a confirmation of his doubts about the direction in which Duchamp was taking art. But this is how Duchamp allowed the work to enter a larger conversation and to circulate through cultural realms way beyond the exhibi-

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tion hall or gallery. Greenberg underestimated the power of this; he may have been right about the eventual waning of the readymade as a model, but there were a lot more powerful tools in Duchamp’s toolbox: the way he made manuals for his own work, the status of the copy and the editioned object, the tweaked reproduction of one’s work, the way art can turn into discourse, his thoughts on the fourth dimension and other quasi-mathematical and quasi-scientific aspects, and so on. In comparison, if you look at a painting by Jackson Pollock, you can admire the work, you can take something away in terms of attitude, experience, or freedom, but there are not so many concrete strategies to take away and use in your own work.

It is not in fact so much about objects now, but about images and their particular kinds of materiality; and now that we are in the realm of the digital, the image can migrate and transform much more rapidly and with all sorts of new forms. This is today’s over-exploited legacy of Duchamp, not the readymades as shocking new sculptural form. It is Duchamp’s work of documentation, information, altered photographs, forgeries, identities, narrativising, and transferrals.

I want to switch gears now. Graham, the last sentence of your essay is “What outmoded provincial might emerge as the Cézanne of the coming era?” You are referring to Cézanne going back to pick up perspectival space and trying to synthesise it with contemporary strategies, and you are pointing to this as a possibly interesting new approach, or a direction for artists today, who retrieve passed-over elements and basically run them through a contemporary filter. With regard to this, there is a case study I would like to share.

I want to go back to the 1970s and look at certain pieces by Robert Whitman. Whitman is not exactly overlooked, but certainly not as well-known as he should be. He is mainly known for his performances from the 1960s and ‘70s, and his Cinema Pieces from as early as 1963, in which installations of everyday objects, like a shower, sink, or window, became screens.

onto which he projected films showing these objects in use. He also worked over many years with Bell Labs engineer Billy Klüver and the Experiments in Art and Technology group, which brought him into contact, crucially, with the Xerox machine. A Xerox machine is interesting as a transitional technology. Unlike a camera, it is not based on a chemical development process; it does not really refer to the world of photography. It is electronic, it is electrostatic, and it sweeps across whatever you place on its flatbed, and puts it together in one image. So we are just one step away from the scanner, which is what is interesting here.

The contemporary artist collaboration Guyton/Walker, consisting of Wade Guyton and Kelley Walker, uses a scanner as one of their main tools, and a whole component of their work comes out of something Whitman did in 1974 when he had a fellowship at Xerox. The photocopier was not a common artist’s tool at the time; you had to have this kind of access. What Whitman started doing was Xeroxing sliced fruit, and fish, and other food.
To return to the present, Guyton and Walker both saw the 2003 Whitman exhibition at Dia Art Foundation, where Guyton was working. In the exhibition, there is a 1976 poster announcing an earlier Whitman show at Dia that includes a sliced lime and a sliced orange placed on the flatbed of the Xerox and turned into a flat graphic element. These Xeroxed fruit slices then became the cover for Dia’s book, *Robert Whitman: Playback*. And this turned directly into a series of works in which Guyton/Walker started putting sliced fruit, particularly limes, through their scanner. What is different now is that the scanner brings the fruit not simply to the page, but into digital space, where you can do all kinds of things to a file. You turn the lime orange, you blow it up, and you pervert it. It is open to manipulations and applications in various formats, and to printing on different kinds of objects and surfaces.

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You can see here the naked file as information first of all, a Photoshop document. The image was then printed by inkjet in various compositions onto different surfaces and objects: a paint can, canvas, sheetrock, the ubiquitous building material, itself part of an installation, and most recently, as depicted, laminated onto a table.

These artists are not the new Cézannes, by the way! But I am interested in taking up your idea, Graham, of past elements gaining a new relevance when they are brought to contemporary strategies that create a strange synthesis.

I want to close with the image of this table because it brings to mind another question. I wonder how, in thinking about the strangeness of how the scanner takes in the world of objects, and how these images are output through printing technologies in so many adaptable ways in order to cover the world of objects, we might possibly approach an understanding of your notion of “the third table” through the work of art.

This is a concept you wrote about in a notebook for dOCUMENTA (13)’s 100 Notes – 100 Thoughts publication series, which I edited. I don’t want to presume to discuss this notion in too much detail but I will summarise briefly: the first table is the one that scientists would call the “real” table, which is a collection of materials, described in terms of the laws of physics. The second table is the table that humanists would find more real, and this is a table as we know it in everyday life, a familiar object inscribed in social use and customs and so on. You however say that neither of these tables is the real table, that there is a third table, which lies between the two, and which may belong to the culture of the arts. It is a table that is to some degree unknowable, it is a philosophical/artistic table, and I will leave it at that.

In closing, I am hoping that in future discussions we can go a bit further into how an object-oriented philosophy might somehow change how we think about art, what art is, where its place is, and where it may be going.

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8 Graham Harman, The Third Table, dOCUMENTA (13) 100 Notes – 100 Thoughts Series (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2013).