

La Trobe University

Stephen Abblitt

Duchamp, Debord & Derrida walk into a bar: art, theory & everyday life

Abstract:

Pondering the potential of the eponymous joke, this postcritical paper tangentially targets the influence of Dadaism & the Situationist International on the performative reading strategy staged beneath the heading ‘deconstruction’. Haphazardly chronicling a chancy conversation which could never have taken place between Duchamp, Debord & Derrida, it probes the breach between (high & low) theory & art, the critical & the spectacular, repeatedly transgressing the aporetic borderline separating-without-separating these oppositional terms as a demonstration of the intellectual correspondences existing between these theorists & artists. Disdaining deconstruction’s reputation as abstract & obscurantist high theory, it exhibits how this reading strategy is also always already a low theory, found in the practice of everyday life.

Biographical note:

Stephen Abblitt is a literary philosopher and postcritic who recently received his PhD from La Trobe University for a critical-creative thesis addressing some intellectual homologies between James Joyce and Jacques Derrida, presented as a sequence of frustrated correspondences, missed encounters and abortive dialogues. He has recently published on nuclear criticism and the time of the thesis in *TEXT*, and has a ficto-memoir forthcoming in the *James Joyce Quarterly* on mourning, touching, responsibility and hauntology as they relate to the lived experience of reading a first-edition *Ulysses*. His current research project is a study of ‘quantum reading’ and issues of meaning and matter arising with the advent of modernity, for which he is presently not reading *Finnegans wake*.

Keywords:

Dadaism – Deconstruction – Low theory – Punk – Situationist International

Duchamp, Debord & Derrida walk into a bar

Marcel Duchamp, Guy-Ernest Debord & Jacques Derrida walk into a bar. I am listening for the echo of a joke only half heard & half recalled. I am trying to record a conversation that could never have taken place. I don't expect anyone to laugh.

This is not a joke

Duchamp, Debord & Derrida walk into a bar. This is not a joke. Well, it is, but... This is also a consideration of the relationship between theory & art as it is presented in the works of these three thinkers, & an elusive exploration of whatever strange conjunctions might occur between the three movements (Dadaism, the Situationist International & deconstruction) with which their proper names are so intimately connected. Haphazardly chronicling a chancy conversation that could never have taken place between Duchamp, Debord & Derrida, the not-telling of this not-joke probes the breach between (high & low) theory & art, the critical & the spectacular, repeatedly transgressing the borderline separating-without-separating these oppositional terms as a demonstration of the intellectual correspondences existing between these three theorists & artists as they each attempt to ground theory & art in the ordinary practice of everyday life.

Proust & price tags

Duchamp, Debord & Derrida walk into a bar. They sit in a quiet booth in a dingy corner at a rickety table, improbably incognito, & they drink, & the conversation turns eventually to the unbridgeable but strangely fluid distance purported to separate theory & art. Derrida takes a sip, gently places his glass on the table before him, gleefully clasps his hands & with a peculiarly nostalgic tone to his voice, recalls a line from Marcel Proust on the relationship between theory & art, which the philosopher bemusedly quoted first in his autobiographical essay 'Circumfession': 'A work in which there are theories is like an object on which one has left the price tag' (1993, 62). He laughs, a deep & potent but also a nervous laughter, & comments that such an attitude is 'the grimace of good taste naïve enough to believe one can efface the labour of theory' (63). Duchamp & Debord nod in sober agreement, but Derrida is unsure if they really understand.

Sketching this incomplete scene, this strange ficto-critical situation, I am indecisively limping toward a hybridised species of critical-creative writing. Art is not theory & theory is not art, but as I tell & retell this eponymous joke or not-joke, 'Duchamp, Debord & Derrida walk into a bar', I create both theory & art, both & also neither, & this epistemological undecidability breaks open a fissure in which something vitally novel & unexpected & unprecedented & joyously otherwise might take place.

Near & far

Duchamp, Debord & Derrida walk into a bar. As they sit & drink & laugh, Derrida pauses, mutters something about an 'irreducible contamination' (2011, 15) affecting the borderlines of signification, the gap between sign & object, theory & art, criticism & spectacle. He takes two coasters, round & made from cork, & strategically positions these on the table before him, one directly in front of him, on the nearest edge of the table, & the other on the furthest edge of the table. He is thinking

spatially, graphically, geographically & cartographically, & hopes this might assist Duchamp & Debord to better understand his point. He explains that the space between two terms such as 'theory' & 'art', or 'near' & 'far', can be easily represented by something so simple as the decision between stepping & not stepping, a basic hesitation over whether or not to advance, & in which direction among the many possibilities, so problematising the binary near & far, closing the gap without moving. 'Each time,' he says,

in one & the other, the opposition of near & far, with the immense, semantic network it orders, finds itself annulled, not in the confusion or the circle of the annulus, but according to what I call, provisionally, *la démarche d'un pas*, the (dis)approach of a no/pace. What happens when the near becomes far, when the near comes-from far?

(17).

A hesitant step, a physical impasse, an aporia, an insoluble logical impasse or an undecidable decision, but also a refusal or incapacity to reconcile incompatible or contradictory terms, a conceptual porousness that nevertheless retains distinction. To demonstrate, he nonchalantly swats a hand at the glass of wine before him, spilling it across the table. You see? The wine spreads across the table, a mock-oceanic flood soaking first the near coaster & then the far one, as if they might be connected by this fluid contravening the borders of their discrete materialities. This is 'an event with unlimited consequences', he continues, & a wry smile creeps across his face as he points at the mess on the table. There is no step to be taken, no near & far as the gap is bridged by the rich red fluid, just this aporetic transgression, a murky space in between. The unlimited consequences of when the near becomes the far? This is not a reversal of terms, or a collapse of terms into some indefinable conceptual mass, but it is an impassable aporetic madness, approaching & dis-approaching a position, a destination, but finding oneself incapable of moving forward. The borderline remains undecidable, & a practised irresolution reigns. This is what he hopes to make them understand. The bartender looks on, cloth in hand, a sardonic shake of his head as he cleans Derrida's theoretical & artistic mess.

As Derrida performs this strange & subtle Situationist intervention in a fictional bar somewhere in a disjointed & out-of-time Paris, these terms near & far graphically represent a certain distancing, an intangible spacing, *espacement*, an irreducibility best expressed simply as the 'impossibility for an identity to be closed on itself' (1981, 94). The Other is irreducible, always already threatening to transgress against the sanctity of the borderline. This *espacement* is 'a fissure without limit', threatening or promising to break open at each point, in each moment. But it is a fissure which 'still holds together, near & present to each other, the two that it separates', a fissure which 'separates without separating, keeps up without keeping together' (2011, 24).

Jonathan Dollimore intervenes: 'To be against (opposed to) is also to be against (close to, in proximity to) or, in other words, up against' (1991, 229). Theory & art, near & far, are against & up against one another: both opposed & close, but decisively, & crucially, neither one nor the other. When I write 'Duchamp, Debord & Derrida walk into a bar', these names are also against & up against one another, irreducible & separated-without-being-separate.

Ampersand

The ampersand serves a purpose more significant than writerly shorthand. The ampersand performs a doubled function as the borderline separating theory & art, near & far, Duchamp & Debord & Derrida. It is the borderline that separates without separating. As Derrida spills his glass of wine, he is also graphically ‘twisting the separatrix’ (Kipnis 1991, 14). The separatrix is the ‘/’, ‘aka solidus, virgule, slash, slant, diagonal, &, in French, *ligne, barre oblique, trait*’. Marking ‘the inseparability of those terms that it separates’, it is ‘the incision of decision, the cut that is the possibility of management, of rendering complexity manageable (from the French, *traitable*), of keeping things in line, keeping them straight’ (32) & the ampersand performs a similar function – although perhaps less divisively: it holds apart but pulls closely together the two terms in question – theory & art, near & far – conceptual adversaries & intimate bedfellows, neither oppositional nor allied nor simply neighbourly but engaged in an infinite, playful struggle over the critical-spectacular territory between them, this disputed zone. So when I write theory & art, I am vitally engaged, by the simple mark of the ampersand, in, at the same time, demarcating & disputing this borderline, crossing & recrossing the border, but hesitating, & pulling up short, always already, of its erasure.

Fountain

Duchamp does not speak, does not know how to respond, but silently ponders Derrida’s words & actions, noting how his own artworks concern the pushing & probing & penetrating of the borderlines between theory & art, & he notes how Dadaism – this self-declared anti-artistic & anti-theoretical movement to which his proper name is so intimately attached, & which is only capable of being presented as an artistic & theoretical critique – presses against & pressures the borders of realism & reason & logic, sustaining itself through a scattered but programmatic surrealistic nonsense, an intensely meaningful meaninglessness that can never quite be spoken. ‘Dada means nothing’ (in Richter 2004, 35), but, as it interrogates the fissure separating-without-separating meaning & not-meaning, sense & nonsense, it is never meaningless – something as powerfully transgressive as Hugo Ball’s wonderful Dada sound-poem ‘Gadji beri bimba’ could never be considered meaningless or nonsensical. Conducting its questioning of art from the vantage point of art, against & up against art, Duchamp realises that Dadaism is an essentially aporetic critique, confronting an impasse & refusing to bulldoze straight through in a destructive logocentric manner, but instead embracing the undecidability, revelling in the potentialities of this either/or/neither/nor situation as the categories of theory & art prove singly insufficient as descriptions of the practices & strategies he is engaged in. Duchamp stands, excuses himself, leaves the table & strides across the room. He thinks as he walks. The near-perfect blending of theory & art occurs in the object of the readymade, ‘an ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist’ (in Obalk 2000, np), the most ordinary, everyday manufactured objects selected, modified & presented as art, situated in the context of the art institution, to interrogate the nature & status of art. He pushes open the bathroom door, pauses a moment & as he enters recalls his most infamous readymade, a work titled *Fountain*: in 1917 he found & presented a standard porcelain urinal, laid flat on

its back rather than upright in the usual position, & signed 'R. Mutt 1917', to an exhibition organised by the Society of Independent Artists, who were bound to accept all members' submissions, but who took exception to *Fountain* & refused to exhibit it. He deliberately, provocatively, ignored aesthetics & intended to offend, testing the institutional parameters of art, renouncing any purely ontological definition. Standing before the grimy porcelain urinal, he unbuttons his fly. The readymade – *Fountain* in particular, not so much for its shocking scatological bent, but for its assertion that everyday life is worthy of artistic consideration – reframes what art is & can be, & the relationship between art-as-aesthetics & art-as-ideas, through its 'interpretative elasticity' (Hopkins 2002, 255), the openness of its critical reception, & in this Duchamp begins to feel an affinity with the mad, manic philosopher espousing his reading strategy titled 'deconstruction'. Both he & Derrida are concerned with, he realises, 'rewriting the boundaries confining art & language', challenging 'closure & containment' (Tucker 2010, 2) as they both open texts to so many potential future meanings, revealing through their theoretical & artistic practices that 'there is always another way of seeing or of staging the scene, another perspective just beyond the horizon of the last one' (22). What also strikes Duchamp, as he pisses into this particular urinal, much like any other, is the sheer laziness & mundaneness of his enterprise (in itself a critique of theory & art): in its refusal to aspire to the conventions of common artistic practice, something as functional & ordinary & everyday as this recontextualised receptacle of piss opens the artistic (& theoretical) potential of the everyday, which Duchamp embraces wholeheartedly:

I would like to be – I don't know what to say – non-existent, instead of being for or against. ... The idea of the artist as a sort of superman is comparatively recent. ... I'm against this attitude of reverence the world has. Art, etymologically speaking, means to 'make'. Everybody is making, not only artists, & maybe in coming centuries there will be a making without the noticing (in Hopkins 2002, 256).

Everybody is making art; everybody is making theory. Duchamp deserves a few moments' privacy now.

Highs & lows

Duchamp, Debord & Derrida walk into a bar. McKenzie Wark lurks in the corner, eavesdropping on the conversation, before finally working up the courage to approach the three seated men. He speaks in terms of 'high' & 'low' theory, explaining that high theory is fine & good ('critical thought that is created within spaces such as the university', 'within the space of a given game'), but that 'low theory, which comprises those somewhat rarer moments when, coming out of everyday life, you get a certain milieu that can think itself', contains a far more revolutionary potential. Emboldened by the sage if silent nods of the three men, he continues: 'Low theory is the attempt to think everyday life within practices created in & of & for everyday life, using or misusing high theory to other ends' (2011b, np). 'Inventing new practices of knowledge' (2012, np), this low theory is found in 'the organic concept-forming practices of everyday life', 'dedicated to the practice that is critique & the critique that is practice' (2011a, 3), & so troubles the borderline between theory & art, critique & praxis, criticism & spectacle. Returning 'in moments, not of disappointment, but of boredom' (a manifestly counter-revolutionary emotional state), it 'takes critique

gently by the neck & leads it outwards, towards the labyrinth that is the production of situations, including the production of new forms of critique itself' (156). This is what your Situationist disturbances strive for, he ventures, gesturing to Debord: they transform the practice of everyday life into both an art form & a method of aesthetic, cultural, social & political theorisation & critique, a critique of everyday life enacted through the practices of everyday life, blending the theoretical & the artistic, the high & the low, the elevated & the everyday. Debord clasps his hands, rubs them together. Duchamp contemplatively twists & twirls his moustache. Derrida just smiles.

Spectacles & situations

Duchamp, Debord & Derrida walk into a bar. As he quietly sits & listens to Duchamp & Derrida endeavour to enunciate their everyday critiques & practices, Debord contemplates the spectacle. 'All of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*', he begins, talking over his two companions: 'Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation' (1983, §1). The spectacle represents 'a world vision which has become objectified' (§5), revealing 'the heart of unrealism of the real society' (§6), positing an almost hyper-real disconnection between reality & representation, the 'affirmation of appearance & affirmation of all human life, namely social life, as mere appearance' (§10). More vitally, he continues, his voice rising, it 'philosophises reality' as 'the concrete life of everyone' is 'degraded into a speculative universe' (§19): as everyday life is transformed into representation, it becomes detached, 'the concrete inversion of life', & reality only '*partially* unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation', 'the autonomous movement of the non-living' (§2). This reduction of reality to the spectacle is to be combatted through the performative construction of the situation, a disturbing, temporary, singular, unrepeatability of space & time, 'a moment of life concretely & deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambiance & a game of events' (1958, np). The situation is both a practice & critique of everyday life, jolting us out of the false consciousness controlling our boring modernity (boredom is counter-revolution, a form of control by self-control), liberating us from the commodification & alienation of everyday life. Duchamp & Derrida are stunned silent by this sudden Situationist outburst.

Delinquency & diversion

Duchamp, Debord & Derrida walk into a bar. Earlier in the day, as they meander through the Parisian streets on their way to this unnameable bar, they will have 'discovered a new city via a circulated drifting ... through the old' (Wark 2011a, 17). This is where theory & art & everyday life most evidently meet: in the urban spaces of the city, the material manifestation of a commodified & alienated modernity. Re-signifying the city through their aimless but meaningful *flâneur*-istic & psychogeographical wanderings ('the walker transforms each spatial signifier into something else', intones Michel de Certeau [1984, 98]), they will have revealed to each other a common interest in the practice of everyday life as critique. An infamous Situationist tactic, this psychogeography 'is a *practice* of the city as at once an objective & subjective space' (Wark 2011a, 27), revealing 'a new kind of knowledge, reached primarily in the *dérive*' (28), defined by Debord, later, in the bar, after much

consumption & contemplation, as ‘a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances’ (1958, np). Excavating ‘other uses for space besides the functional’ (Wark 2011a, 25), the *dérive* is a drifting through ‘the lineaments of intersubjective space’, & ‘a practice of play & strategy which invents a way of being’ (28), a passionate practice of play & strategy that is also a stinging performative critique. The *dérive*, this critique-by-practice of everyday life which does not exist except as a singular, fleeting, momentary performance or situation, is not confined to the urban spaces of the modern city, but occurs textually & discursively; it occurs in, for example, Duchamp’s *Fountain*, or Derrida’s deconstructionist works such as *La carte postale*, as he turns & returns to, & nervously circles around, an argument he can hardly make let alone clearly state, instead working by example, excavating new routes toward new knowledges in a genre-bending literary-fictional-autobiographical writerly practice & critique of the everyday life of this theorist & artist, recording everyday life & in this act of inscription working through, but never resolving, his high & low theoretical critique. Duchamp, Debord & Derrida walk into a bar.

Plagiarism & progress

‘Ideas improve’, continues Debord, later in the evening, as twilight descends upon the bar: ‘The meaning of words participates in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It embraces an author’s phrase, makes use of his expressions, erases a false idea, & replaces it with the right idea’ (1983, §207). Progress only occurs hand-in-hand with plagiarism, the subtle but meaningful correction of previous theories & arts & everyday practices. ‘All culture is derivative’, & any considered critique hoping to affect change must begin with the ‘destruction of the ownership of the sign’ (Wark 2011a, 37). The textual & discursive corollary to the *dérive* is the *détournement*, a term meaning ‘to detour, to hijack, to lead astray, to appropriate’ (35). Debord defines it as ‘the integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu’ (1958, np), subversively sifting through ‘the material remnants of past & present culture for materials whose untimeliness can be utilised against bourgeois culture’ (Wark 2011a, 39), attacking ‘a kind of fetishism, where the products of collective human labour in the cultural realm can become a mere individual’s property’ (40), an act of ‘unauthorised appropriation’ with a preference for anti-statements thrusting the past back into the present.

Punk & possibility

The door to the bar bursts open. A young man – short & wiry, but powerful, confronting, with spiky red hair & a mad glint in his eye – stands hostilely in the doorway. *I am an antichrist*, he screams, a primal & guttural cry, all sound & fury signifying nothing – although not without intent, not without meaning. He stands before Duchamp, Debord & Derrida, ‘an object screaming with muteness’ (Marcus 2011, 34), & presents his own brutalist, idiosyncratic critique of everyday life, not embracing a destructive nihilistic oblivion, but instead striving to call into being a Dadaist-Situationist-Punk army of outcasts & misfits, jolting us out of the mundaneness of the spectacularisation of everyday life, his voice denying ‘all social

facts' & in this performative utterance affirming that 'everything is possible' (2). *I am an anarchist*. This is 'just a pop song', writes Greil Marcus of 'Anarchy in the UK':

a would-be, has-been hit record, a cheap commodity, & Johnny Rotten is nobody, an anonymous delinquent whose greatest achievement, before that day in 1975 when he was spotted in Malcolm McLaren's Sex boutique on King's Road in London, had been to occasionally irritate those he passed on the street.

It is so mundane & everyday, so *low*, not at all special in aesthetic terms, on any level, & yet as he screams – *Don't know what I want but I know how to get it* – he breaks through a specularised everyday life & into something new & unprecedented. 'The breach in the pop milieu opened into the realm of everyday life', argues Marcus:

the milieu where, commuting to work, doing one's job in the home or the factory or the office or the mall, going to the movies, buying groceries, buying records, watching television, making love, having conversations, not having conversations, or making lists of what to do next, people actually lived (3).

I wanna destroy the passerby. Punk, as practised by Johnny Rotten & the Sex Pistols, is a critique of everyday life enacted through the everyday life of a young man shouting angrily at the world, deconstructing the spectacle in the hope of finding something – it doesn't matter what; content is far less significant here than the staging of the Dadaist-Situationist-Punk disturbance – that is actually happening. *Cos I wanna be anarchy*.

Destinations & drifting

Duchamp, Debord & Derrida walk into a bar. I didn't know where I was going from here, & I don't know where I've gone even now. Embarked on this discursive *dérive*, there really was no destination; we have just been drifting, moving by chance between Dadaism, the Situationist International, Punk & deconstruction, never quite sure just what is being revealed as we go.

Duchamp, Debord & Derrida walk out of a bar.

Works cited

- De Certeau, M 1984 *The practice of everyday life*, trans SF Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press
- Debord, G-E 1958 'Definitions', trans K Knabb, *Internationale Situationiste* No 1, June 1958, at <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/definitions.html> (accessed 14 August 2012)
- Debord, G-E [1967] 1983 *Society of the spectacle*, Detroit: Black & Red
- Derrida, J [1972] 1981 *Positions*, trans A Bass, London & New York: Continuum
- [1991] 1993 'Circonfession', in G Bennington & J Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, Chicago & London: Chicago University Press
- [1976] 2011 'Pace not(s)', trans JP Leavey, in JP Leavey (ed), *Parages*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 11-101
- Dollimore, J 1991 *Sexual dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*, Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Hopkins, D 2002 'Marcel Duchamp's readymades & anti-aesthetic reflex', in P Smith and C Wilde (eds), *A companion to art theory*, London: Blackwell, 253-63
- Kipnis, J 1991 'Twisting the separatrix', *Assemblage* 14, 30-61
- Marcus, G [1989] 2011 *Lipstick traces: a secret history of the twentieth century*, revised 20th-anniversary edn, London: Faber & Faber
- Obalk, H 2000 'The unfindable readymade', *tout-fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal* 1: 2, May 2000, at http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_2/Articles/obalk.html (accessed 14 August 2012)

- Richter, H 2004 *Dada: art and anti-art*, London & New York: Thames & Hudson
- Tucker, TD 2010 *Derridada: Duchamp as readymade deconstruction*, Lanham: Lexington Books
- Wark, M 2011a *The beach beneath the street: the everyday life and glorious times of the Situationist International*, London & New York: Verso
- 2011b ‘McKenzie Wark – interview’, interviewed by J Gordon-Farleigh, *STIR. Anger. Analysis. Action.*, at <http://stirtoaction.com/?p=461> (accessed 19 June 2012)
- 2012 ‘Preoccupying: McKenzie Wark’, *The Occupied Times of London*, 2 August, at <http://theoccupiedtimes.co.uk/?p=6451> (accessed 14 August 2012)