

The

Comfort

Within

Certainty

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The Comfort Within Certainty

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Summary of Topic

The world we live in has become a passing mediocracy, our lives are filled with liminal moments that glorify a consumerist cultural ideal. Inspiration for this essay was my own personal interest in discovering ways in which I can produce conceptual art that ultimately challenge the idea of art and ways of living. Exploring existential truths that are hidden in set conditions, creating experiences that break free from previous encounters and in their un-normality there is sublime.

Exploring notions within the deep void of the absurd.

Introduction

The world we live in has become a passing mediocracy, “there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.” (Baudrillard, 1994) Each day is an onslaught of meaningless signs, communication, commodity and appearances, our lives are filled with liminal moments that glorify a consumerist cultural ideal. The initial thought process behind this essay is the study of surreal capitalist hedonistic moments that fill our lives, I will be investigating ways in which artists challenge and provoke ways of thinking that go against normality. Exploring notions within the deep void of the absurd.

Inspiration for this essay was my own personal interest in discovering ways in which I can produce conceptual art (Within the fields of producing a visual image) that ultimately challenge the idea of art and ways of living. Exploring existential truths that are hidden in set conditions, creating experiences that break free from previous encounters and in their un-normality there is sublime. The art encounter must act “as a rupture in our habitual modes of being” (O’Sullivan, 2006) Within this subversion there is possibility for something new – creating a chance encounter that brings about new modes of being.

In order to examine these notions I will first define the theories and key terms that were used for this essay, firstly being the visual image and reproduction. In the twenty-first century the visual image surrounds us, constantly obscuring the ways in which we experience the genuine art encounter and its representation. John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* notes about the subjective truth behind seeing - sight being restless - and how it has changed with technology, the eye is always looking to seek meaning, “Seeing comes before words.” (1972, p. 7) The act of sight has only become more indulged in visual imagery as its accessibility has grown greater, reproductions of art and image can be seen infinitely and even further than before. Berger believed that “When the camera reproduces a painting, it destroys the uniqueness of its image.” (1972, p. 19) Ultimately changing its meaning as it is no longer bound to its site-specific situation, in other words the very essence of the work – what *Walter Benjamin in The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* calls the “Aura” (2008, p. 7) of the object, this change can bring about a wider variety of interpretations and subjective ways of seeing.

Secondly the Spectacle, presented by French Marxist philosopher and author, Guy Debord. Debord set out the notions of capitalist driven society (Mainly western European) in his revolutionary book *The Society of the Spectacle*, discussing ideals of commodity, alienation, fetishization, and the bureaucratic spectacle itself.

“The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.” (2021, p. 2) All around us so much so it has become a way of thinking, separating us through set appearances but unifying our way of integrated thinking. To address a societal way of thinking is philosopher Timothy Morton’s concept “Hyper-object”, an entity that is so vast and ephemeral it deconstructs set notions of what an object or thing is. (Morton, 2013) Debord’s proposed hyper-object brings about a degradation to life, an immobilization to free thought and authentic events. The notion of the spectacle also involves life being transformed into one of representation, social life has been turned into one not of living direct experience but one of having, this having would soon develop into one of appearing, “What appears is good; what is good appears.” (Debord, 2021). This idea of representations plays a key role as it is not the interpretation of representation but opposing the representation by subverting it.

This independent inquiry consists of two chapters. The first being the notions of conformity within art, I wish to investigate further the act of challenging and provoking the art encounter, reimagine ways in which artists may produce work. In this chapter I will subjectively select artist’s and their works that I believe successfully achieved these notions of provoking, I wish to uncover not only the methods used but the way of thinking that takes place. The second chapter being the aesthetics of serendipity within art and mainly photography and how it has developed ways of producing work. I will examine the theory behind chance and how it plays a key role against opposing the surreal hedonistic moments of consumer culture. Ultimately, culminating together to subvert our preconceived ways of seeing and how we may contextualise that into the glorified work of art. The overall aim for this essay is to grasp a further understanding on the relationship between signs within the visual image, how the method of production plays an important role within subject choice and how you represent said subject. All in all, producing a informed investigation into the notions of certainty and comfort.

Notions of Conformity

Paris 1913. Marcel Duchamp being a young artist at the time was eager and keen to promote conversation in the art scene, he was already riding a wave of controversy and incomprehension following his painting *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, (PoMA, 1912) after it's showing in 1912 – in Paris, Salon des Indépendants, in Barcelona, Galeries Dalmau's Exposició d'Art Cubista, and finally 1913 in New York, Armory Show. Ridiculed for the advancements against cubism by being too expressive in the painting's movements, essentially too futuristic. (Antliff, M. & Leighton, P. 2008) His reputation already being this ambitious artist provocateur he would soon create some of his most notable works that would have an impact in art history and still be relevant to this day.

Duchamp's conceptual found objects or so called 'Readymades' first appeared, his *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), an object that is comprised of an upside-down bicycle wheel with its forks attached to a stool that is notably a mass-produced item, you could easily spin the wheel at any given time. (MoMA, 2022) Duchamp's readymades were known to be objects of mundane affect, ones that may seem dysfunctional or useless as art. *The Bicycle Wheel* can be seen as the successor of *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, as like the painting the focus is movement but instead of replicating a representation of movement, the readymade can physically move, however, in its movement it is in a fixed state like the painting - creating a futurist kinetic sculpture.



Figure One: Marcel Duchamp (1951 – Third version after lost original 1913) *Bicycle Wheel*, MoMA, New York.

Simply put in one of his lectures *Apropos of Readymades at MoMa (1961)* “In 1913 I had the happy idea to fasten a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool and watch it turn.” (Elderfield, 1992) Duchamp would reproduce this readymade due to being lost and broken or supply and demand of the art world. Although previous bicycle wheels had been lost to various reasons, in 1951 Duchamp authorised a copy work for Sidney Janis, inscribing on the wheel: “Marcel Duchamp 1913 / 1959(sic)”, owned by the Museum of Modern Art. (Snell, 2018) Duchamp is creating an act of authority over the objects to label them as art, the artist being the authoritarian assigning new meaning and value. This act of authority highlights Duchamp’s way of thinking in regard to the readymades, although many of his later readymades, especially Bicycle Wheel were reproductions of the original, the reproduction still stands at the status of a work of art. Reinventing Walter Benjamin’s lack of aura when a work of art is reproduced, although not a representation through the lens of the camera but the actual physical recognition of the art readymade itself.

This challenging of set beliefs about the nature of art is what would define Duchamp’s career and focus as an artist, destroying set out conditions and celebrating the spontaneity of meaningless encounter. The bicycle wheel, a wheel that can no longer be used for its original purpose, its movement is stifled; the wheels function has been transformed. Reimagining the object and its original function.



Figure Two: Marcel Duchamp. Fountain. ADAGP, Paris. & DACS, London. Tate (2022)

Fountain (1917) is notably one of Duchamp's most influential works. The fountain, or urinal, was a work submitted by Duchamp along the terms that the board of curators was a democratic decision to exhibit the work. Essentially, if you paid to display the work you may display what you wish, no conservative decision made by other bodies, but the decision made solely by the artist. Still continuing the original backlash after the title choice and movement of *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* and how this echoed upon the *Society of Independent Artists' salon, New York, 1917*. Mann (2017) notes that what seemed like a practical joke was a real artists submission, the readymade was seen as not a true work of art, one that is too conceptual, ultimately rejected by the board – Duchamp (A member of the board himself) soon resigned in protest. He pushed for years that his reinvention of thinking the readymades and later 'assisted readymades' should be used in exhibition's. (MoMa, 2022)

The idea at hand that pre-existing manufactured objects are taken from everyday life and recontextualised to set the status of works of art. Focusing primarily on concept over the object, making fountain arguably the most challenging work in western twentieth century art. It is still unclear why the society's board rejected fountain, possibly due to its thought-provoking subject of art, philosopher Stephen Hicks notes that Duchamp was purposely creating an extremely provocative piece that would indefinitely cause uproar against art critics, ultimately, Hicks who was very familiar with western European art history commented that "In selecting urinal, his message was clear: Art is something you piss on." (2004, p. 196) Such ill-mannered behaviour and thought was prohibited from the exhibition.



Figure 3: Man Ray Trust / ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2022, Tate.

Similar to Duchamp's readymades and a friend of Duchamp, is artist Emmanuel Radnitzky, known as Man Ray, a visual artist who created most of his works in Paris (1890-1976). His wrapped object piece *L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse*, made up of a sewing machine wrapped in a blanket and tied up with string. Like Duchamp, Ray is taking "everyday objects", to then be "raised to the dignity of a work of art by the artist's act of choice". (Martin, 1999)

Although similar to Duchamp's readymades, Ray's use of the mundane object glorified to its new position - a sewing machine in this case - was inspired by French writer, Isidore Ducasse, the phrase "Beautiful as the chance encounter, on a dissecting table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella" (Ducasse, 1869). An enigmatic and mystifying text that would be greatly admired by the writers and creators in Paris. With whom Man Ray would go on to be an informal member and initiator of the famous movements: Dada (1916-1924) & later the Surrealists (1924-1945) (MoMA, 2022). Both groups would see this phrase to be a model of reinventing the visual image and one of which is seen with strong hidden signs of masqueraded erotic representation: the dissecting table being the bed, and then the female sewing machine with the male umbrella.

Man Ray's wrapped object, however, was one that uses the unknown to unsettle the idea of a suggested sewing machine underneath, the title choice *L'Enigme* only pushes further the mystification of said object. Unlike Duchamp's *Fountain* or *Bicycle Wheel*, there is undeniably an ambiguity to Ray's sewing machine. The wrapping of objects would go on to be greatly admired by surrealist groups, Man Ray's wrapped object a precursor of Rene Magritte's hidden objects and concealed truths, painting *The Lovers* (1928) of two intimate partners with garments cloaking their faces as they embrace shares the same ambiguity on the hidden implication. More large-scale work by Christo (1935-2020), the wrapping of landscapes and landmarks, creating these large site-specific installations that hope to install beauty and joy.

Closer to Man Ray's sewing machine, however, is Christo's *Package on a Table*, 1961, this idea of masking an object to produce thoughts of uncertainty between what we can actually see, and what we believe to be truly under the material. "The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe." (Berger, 1972) Rene Magritte's painting *The Treachery of Images* (1929) highlights this notion perfectly,

painted on are the words *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* – French for ‘this is not a pipe’ – that challenge the relationship between the object and how it corresponds with word and image. Magritte’s art was a direct response to the violence and uncertain times of war, disrupting the rationalism of everyday life that had been an element of bourgeois society. Magritte’s painting tests the relationship between visual representations and language, creating a three-way paradox that will continue to challenge not only the bourgeois society to this day but also the modern conceptions on visual image.

More well-known for his photography in the creative arts Man Ray is still a key figure in the influence of objects in art, his lesser-known objects were ones of paradox and the uncanny. The uncanny is a term that first appeared in German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch’s essay, *Psychology of the Uncanny*, Jentsch phrases the uncanny – “Unheimlich” (German for unhomely) – something which is new and distorted from before, often seen negatively at first sight. (Collins & Jervis. 2008) Sigmund Freud elaborated Jentsch’s theory of the unheimlich, with his essay *The Uncanny*, 1919. Freud repositions the uncanny to a sense of familiarity in its unfamiliarity, unheimlich being the opposition to heimlich (Homely), a direct link between the two ideas: something can be known but be alien at the same time, in its uniqueness we experience the recognition of the art encounter, however, it is the reaffirmation or the destruction that brings about creation, solidifying the objects new possibilities and meaning. Ultimately creating this “strange and anxious feeling sometimes created by familiar objects in unfamiliar contexts.” (Tate, 2022) Leading the eyes of the beholder to feel discomfort within the uncertainty of the art encounter.

The surrealists were unexpectedly some of the first to investigate into the concept of the uncanny and its placement within art. Like Magritte, with an aim to deconstruct rationality and explore notions of the absurd by rejecting literal portrayals of reality to create ones that use dreamlike symbolism, distortion, and the unconventional. Their philosophy based upon the surreal or phenomenal was originally expressed by Andre Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, in which he explains surrealism as: “Psychic automatism in its pre state, by which one proposes to express...the actual functioning of thought...in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.” (1969, p. 26)

The uncanny in photography is one of unconventional signs, as the act of photography is an automatic mechanical process, Middleton (2005) notes that once you release the shutter you are letting the machine take a representation of reality, an uncanny act of itself, however, in the ubiquity of the photographic image, questioning its uncanniness is neutral and ineffective as the spectator draws a clear conclusion of message. Roland Barthes in *Image Music Text*, concludes the photographic uncanny as the image being a connotated message without use of code: the “photograph is not only perceived, received, it is read.” (1977, p. 19), the uncanny photograph or “The photographic paradox can then be seen as the co-existence of two messages,” (1977, p.19). The paradox is not the conclusion of a denoted message and connotated message but perhaps the way in which communication progresses on the basis that the image “is a message without a code; from which proposition must immediately be drawn”. Through the mystified uncertainty of the visual paradox we the viewer experience a genuine art encounter, representation or reproduction, ultimately, “We are forced to thought.” (O’Sullivan, 2006)

The Aesthetics of Chance

The concept of chance has been a strong discussion topic for many fields, whether it is the subject of the practitioner's investigation or the exact method to create a work relating to their field, it has been central to many forms such as art, psychology, science, and general day to day life. The first to realise the capacity behind chance encounters within art were members of either the Dada movement or the Surrealist Movement. Dada was considered the first to begin experimenting with chance and how they can go about incorporating it in both their presentation and methodology of production, drawing main influence from French symbolist writer Stephane Mallarme's poem, *A throw of the dice will never abolish chance*, (1898). (Spitz, 2016) Mallarme's use of typographic methods darts texts across the page, embracing the art of chance as the readers eye must run across the page to follow.

Ideas of embracing chance would soon develop into the work of artists, Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) discussed in Chapter One, Notions of Conformity: as being a chance encounter of object, his work was not so much focussed on making but the very act of encountering readymade objects. Similar to Duchamp is Dada artist Jean Arp's, *Untitled (Collage with Squares Arranged according to the laws of Chance)*, (1917), fellow artists Hans Richter (2002) notes that Arp was working on an expressive painting and tore up a drawing to then see an abstract pattern caused by the dropping of scraps, he would then use this as his main composition piece. Both Duchamp and Arp are letting go of traditional methods by using chance to produce work, Arp's new composition founded upon the constraints of gravity and Duchamp's the chance encounter, these acts simultaneously merge the barrier between art and the controlled taste of the artist.



Figure Four: Jean Arp. 1916-1917. *Untitled (Collage with Squares Arranged according to the laws of Chance)*. MoMA.

Duchamp admitted that there would subsequently be taste in any of his readymades, as the chance encounter implies an act of choice, “I choose one object rather than an-other” (Buchloh, 1994) Arp’s gluing together of torn up pieces of canvas requires notions of taste of how each bit was dropped or stuck together.

Duchamp’s use of chance was a method which questions the conventional ways of producing art, the whole idea stemming from the challenging of art due to the unpredictability at the time of World War two, finding solace in the uncertainty. Both Duchamp and Arp were allowing the art of chance to take them adrift. An artist that combines both these notions is Dutch conceptual artist, Bas Jan Ader. His performative work is one of complete serendipity, many of his works were centred around the notion of falling, his visual images portrayed himself in the act of falling, usually on top of inanimate objects like a house or a tree. Similar to Duchamp’s chance encounter Ader would be handing his entire body over to chance, Ader identified that “when I fall off the roof of my house or into canal, it was because gravity made itself a master over me” (Ader, 2006). With Ader’s photography he is documenting his performance of events but in doing so he is relinquishing control by setting himself to act these meaningless pointless tasks, leaving his fate up to chance. Ader would later go on to the extremes of this performance of fate, setting off into the Atlantic Ocean where he would never be seen again. Although, similar to Arp’s torn up drawing that he would toss into the air and let fall, Ader uses his body to let fall. A precursor of Ader can be the image, *Leap into the Void, 1960*, by Yves Klien, the subjectively doctored image that was spliced together by Klien, Klein’s soaring body became a touchstone for the correlation between performance and photography.

During the nineteen-sixties there was a present shift in photography and its placement within art, it was a crucial point for “photography as art” (Killen, 2006). Artists were contending with an exhausted faith in the medium and recognition that the aesthetic possibilities of art within photography has been preserved or disregarded within the art museum. Art practitioners were exploiting the short comings of abstract expressionism and its effect on art, using a wide range of graphic relationships between image and text. Creating new ways of thinking within the unsure.

Artists at the time were niche on the subject of being addressed as a photographer, seeing the medium as limiting and set too many rules to follow that is critiqued by people on a fine detail. Conceptual artist Richard Long (1994) notes “I am an artist who sometimes chooses to use photographs, although I am not a photographer,”, for Long, photography was not a means to follow the rules and abide by technical laws, it was a way in which he can progress art forward.

1973, John Baldessari produced a work entitled *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)*. The work is made up of twelve offset lithographs of colour image containing three orange balls, the twelve plates resemble what’s left after the thirty-six attempts to get a geometric straight line. Each image is not numbered or named so there is zero chance of a prescribed sequence, only the random order which has been given to them. This was a crucial part of history for photography as an art, as Baldessari was one of the few artists fighting for the movement’s autonomy and aesthetic possibilities. Like many of the produced items by this generation, John Baldessari’s *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)* is a seemingly easily recordable act or performance, what is known as a record of child’s play throwing balls into the air for no reason, is both a historical performance and new engagement to produce visual image. Like Bas Jan Ader’s fall, in the simplistic act there is birth to reimagine photography, the almost vigorous simplicity is precedent of its development photography as an art. Once again, we are seeing creation coming from the depths of the absurd and how it plays an important role in the disruption of everyday life through the genuine art encounter.



Figure Five: 1973, John Baldessari, *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)*.

Artsy, 2020.

Before Baldessari's *Throwing Three Balls*, Baldessari was greatly influenced by Marcel Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages*, 1914, Duchamp's work like Baldessari was an experiment to "imprison and preserve forms obtained through chance." (Duchamp, 1964). At first glance the work presents on a horizontal plane of three curvilinear threads that are one metre in length, glued to narrow strips of canvas painted Prussian blue, on the other side mounted a tilted support atop the platform consisted of three flat strips cut alongside to match the curve of the threads. Duchamp dropped these threads from the height of one metre to enlist gravity and chance in producing a straight line and some hope for a geometric sinuous curve. The metre long threads supposedly having an imaginative outcome and correlation to the height as which they are dropped at. He was essentially prescribing the actions of the three-dimensional displaced into two-dimensional, turning a performance-based act into one that is a representation of reality, Duchamp was curious as to how the metre thread "absorbs" the third dimension in its fall and representation. (Molderings, H. 2010)

In *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)*, Baldessari carried on from where Duchamp had left off. Using three balls instead of three threads, subjecting them to an aerial experiment in chance photography. By throwing the three balls Baldessari is subjugating the object to adrift with the notions and exploration of chance. Depicting his orange balls against the blue sky, whereas Duchamp put the threads against the Russian blue of the canvas, similar geometry-based outcomes of turning three-dimensional acts into the representation of two-dimensional to be used for the photographic message. Duchamp used gravity to deform the substance whereas Baldessari used it to form approximations of a geometric ideal put forth. Baldessari hoped to produce an ideal geometric shape with the parameters of thirty-six attempts, the thirty-six frames on a standard roll of film, however, Baldessari ultimately fails: he could not control how the balls would fall. Throwing three balls is a representation of photography as a social form, like other photographer's using thirty-six opportunities to take a visual image and pick your best one. Baldessari tried to eliminate the possibility of chance by repeating the process again and again. Ultimately though, Baldessari does not make the 'perfect' aesthetic of three balls being geometrically lined up, showing that even in the interpretation there is taste as to how the aesthetic of chance should act.

Baldessari indecisively led to a new way of thinking in regard to modernist photography and how it portrays social logic through the medium of a mechanical process. Visual paradox, dynamic plays on image and text, social juxtapositions, were all new ideas created by the explorations of chance. Robin Kelsey (2015) notes that by the nineteen-seventies the use of chance had already become a key input into the systems of cultural productions, photography and statistical reasoning were emerging together in a newly receptive world full of reproductions and Spectacle. The brilliance behind *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)* lies in its dual use of both the methodology of chance production, and uncontrollable outcomes of using chance to stimulate a new mode of being. Baldessari discovered a way in which he may align subject and method together, rebelling the bureaucratic rationalism and escape the restraints of painting.

Conclusion

Due to the constant introduction of new meaning and endless “rhetoric image” (Barthes, 1977) the ways in which we go about living have been blurred to a sense of melancholy. The distortion between experience and representation has never been greater, shifting our focus from representation we must allow for raw encounter to take place. Letting go of any preconceived notions of thought and being open to new ways of thinking.

The Comfort Within Certainty highlights ways in which society’s modes of production are ones that nullify our way of living and set limits to the boundaries of the visual image, technologies advancements mean for a constant barrage of photographic messages, with and without a code. Whether we look at the artists who challenged set conditions on what art is, developing conceptual paradoxes that continue to influence art or the explorations of absurd methodologies that produce a strange beauty in the unexpected. It is clear that the limitations set out by either traditional medium or the very mechanical event used to record, are ultimately creating a document as to which critiques preconceived notions of being.

The destruction of art is what creates art. Out of deconstructing the semiotic relationship between signs, not setting boundaries and limitations between them but interluding them together, the artist may produce work as a subject or means of creation.

The discomfort caused by uncertainty is a strong phenomenon within art, the psychoanalysis of danger or unpleasantness. Subjecting O’Sullivan’s notes of art being a rupture to our habitual ways of being. A successful art encounter is one that forces the spectator to think. How I myself as an artist may achieve this is what I set out to do within this essay, I now have a clearer understanding between the difference of method and subject, and how you go about representing them. To challenge the ideas of art and ways of living, as an artist you must breakdown the signs, the paradoxical relationships that can be created in certain circumstances between the connoted and denoted message. Creating relationships of the uncanny and visual paradox are stronger methods as of the assumptions and meaning the spectator must coincide with themselves. The work must not always be finished or have a bespoke ritualist meaning displaced by

the artist, but it is the very relationship between the spectator's preconceived notions and present art encounter they experience in the "here and now" (Barthes, 1977)

I believe the sense of rational outcome and control is still very present today as it was 100 years ago for artists. The world we live in is a hyper-objected truth mediated by the spectacle and consumer value of appearances, there is a sense of comfort within the rational. We must break free from the psychic automation and through illogical spontaneous and absurd ways of being, we may experience the convulsive beauty of the world and liberate the unconscious.

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