

ART FOR THE PEOPLE, ART BY THE PEOPLE

A Discussion of Revolution in Art

By Andrea Steedman

WHY THIS IS NEEDED

Art is a basic human need. As related by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels,ⁱ art comes after agriculture but before politics or even religion and yet throughout history it has been cast aside to a second-rate place. We have grown so much accustomed to artists creating the world around us that we no longer even notice or appreciate it. Even further, art is looked at as a talent, not a learnable skill, and if people are not immediately good at it, they abandon hope of improving.

This was not how William Morris saw it, though. He believed anyone could become an artist or craftsmen. When William Morris began studying the tenets of Socialism as laid down by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels he applied what he read to his field—art.ⁱⁱ He agreed whole-heartedly with the assertion that art is a right for all people just as is the right to express oneself, choose who shall govern, or believe what one wants. He strove in the movement he helped found, Arts and Crafts,ⁱⁱⁱ and for the rest of his life in a variety of ways to make art more accessible to common people who tended to see it as the preserve of the upper classes—a belief the wealthy cultivated.

Almost a century later, another artist furthered the revolutionary cause while staying as apolitical as possible. Marcel Duchamp wanted to art to be more about the thought behind an artwork than the talent of the artist who made it.^{iv} Throughout his career Duchamp strove to create pieces that would make people think more and passively see less. He also broke down the barriers that had formerly defined art.^v There have always been

“proper” ways of creating art, and even now this is true—but now the proper way is not simply with a brush or clay but with your mind.^{vi} Duchamp also helped promote a more populist way of art making, because he changed the art world so that artists no longer have to have specific credentials. If Duchamp could upturn a urinal and call it art, everything was fair game.^{vii}

Furthermore, in this world where art could be made by anyone, art is everywhere. People scrawl it on walls as they walk by and hand it out at street corners. One group of artists working today not only use their thoughts, but bring their message directly to the people. Muralists and “street artists” do not use just canvas or brushes, the world around them is their canvas. As with any art form, not all of these artists have something to say, but many do and their messages are hard to deny or avoid because they are often literally in your face. They do not have to ask permission to make their voices heard: they confront us where we live.

All three of these art movements have in common their desire to change things and make art more accessible to people who would otherwise have never know about it. Each has had varied success, as well as failures, as we shall see.

WILLIAM MORRIS

While it is no secret that William Morris (1834-1896) was a devout proponent of Socialism, his legacy in our cultural history is as a key figure in art. In books on Socialism he is a footnote, but in art, he is known as one of the founders of the Arts and Crafts movement of the late 1800s. Therefore, any political influence he has had on those who came after him was first and foremost through his art.

Fittingly, Morris arrived at politics just as those studying him do today: through art. To a great many, art may only bear a slight attachment to politics, but to others, the two are

intrinsically connected. He saw art and political activism as two solutions to the central problem that surrounded him: social inequality. Karl Marx's writings formed the basis of William Morris' beliefs on Socialism and of his specialized idea that art was not separate from revolution. He saw how in the society around him, the proletarian workers were in a prison of toil that stripped them of their creative expression. As Morris saw it, people could not produce something in which they took pride and so felt unhappy and cheapened. William Morris's art, and specifically, the philosophy of the Arts and Crafts movement, was an expression of his worldview.^{viii}

This movement, for which he is best remembered, has stood the test of time as something truly revolutionary in the history of art, yet was unable to achieve all of its political goals. As noted by Rene Wellek, "it is the paradox of Victorian aestheticism that Ruskin and Morris wanted to revolutionize society and all the things in it and that finally they and their followers succeeded only in establishing a new decorative style."^{ix} This may be overly harsh, because the Arts and Crafts Movement (by any account) did much more than this. William Morris was painfully aware of the paradox existent in the movement during his lifetime, however. It was because of, not in spite of, the opportunities afforded him that Morris worked to make change for people at every level of society. Even though the Arts and Crafts movement and his art are arguably his most lasting contributions, he was not content with this alone, and would move on to more direct action.

William Morris moved from visual art to writing because he thought he could get his point across more directly and therefore much more quickly.^x Morris's political writings included *The Dream of John Ball & News from Nowhere* (see Figures 1-5). Morris found writing to be one of many forms of communication with which to reach his audience, as many people enjoyed fanciful stories and came more easily to agree with the political undertones

when they were cloaked in fantasy. Furthermore, the addition of elaborate illustrations encouraged his readers' support of a socialist utopia.

Morris believed anyone could learn how to make arts and crafts, and so he opened a workshop and he himself taught his workers, knowing the techniques to produce most home crafts of the day. He "often hired unskilled enthusiasts, children (including boys from a nearby orphanage), and relatives (mostly women) of friends and workers."^{xi} Furthermore, the buildings he used had plenty of windows and lights, and they were set among gardens, with a stream running through the land for the workers to enjoy.^{xii} This stood in stark contrast to the stifling atmosphere and working conditions of most factories of the time.^{xiii} Morris even allowed room for personal freedom of expression into each person's tasks, and walked among them in work clothes, "his hands stained with dye."^{xiv} He had nearly 100 workers who all adored him, which is hardly surprising in a time where the 8 hour work day was not yet enacted^{xv} and the factory assembly lines made workers simply parts of a machine, unskilled and undignified.

William Morris was one of the first aesthetes in England to deny his social standing in the Capital Class and truly sympathize with the worker movement. As E. P. Thompson notes, "one must imagine the symbolic value of this celebrated poet and great designer marching with common working men, spending his evenings speaking in dingy lecture rooms, exhausting his health in preaching the message at street corners in rain and wind."^{xvi} Nearly fifty years after a speech he gave to a group of miners in Seghill, copies of his works were still found in their homes, even after economic desperation forced them to sell much of their furniture.^{xvii} There is no doubt he made a difference in these peoples lives.

In modern society, many see art as a commodity. Art is bought and sold, and the money that pieces are sold for in the auction house or gallery barely get back to the artist.

This very concept destroys the soul of the art and would have appalled William Morris, who sought to integrate every area of the chain between artist and consumer. This is where the legacy of Morris comes in. The idea that art should be made by all and free to all does not occur to most artists, but when they read about the Arts and Crafts movement, they are shown another way. A way that was just as revolutionary for its day. People in the art world are smart enough to know that just because some elements failed, this does not mean the idea was bad, and if anyone can fix Socialism, it is the creative minds in the art.

MARCEL DUCHAMP

One of the things many art historians agree upon is that the re-definition of what constitutes art is one of the central changes in the art world in the last 50 years. This change can be seen as a direct result of the influence of Marcel Duchamp. Because of his theories about art and his creations, art is now more accessible to a wider range of people. This is two-fold: first, more people are exposed to art than ever before, and secondly, after Duchamp *anyone* can be an artist. People have the latter very literally with both disastrous and amazing results. In this section, the specific ways in which Duchamp brought these changes about will be explained and explored.

Probably the most famous of Marcel Duchamp's pieces and the most controversial "ready-made" was *Fountain* (1917, Figure 6). As everyone knows, this piece was basically a urinal turned upside-down and signed R. Mutt, a pseudonym Duchamp decided to use. This work initiated Duchamp's idea that art could be *anything*,^{xviii} since he neither created it nor altered it in any real way. Yet, once it had been designated as such, it *was* art. Duchamp's idea has since been expanded to define art as paintings left on bus benches, spray-paintings on walls, and yarn knitted around lamp posts (see Figures 7, 8, and 9.) In the contemporary art world, Duchamp's idea that *anything* can be art is being carried out. This

means that not only do pedestrians get to see Banksy's art, they can also feel empowered to make art themselves. In an indirect way, Marcel Duchamp managed to get the art world to a place closer to the one William Morris failed to get to.

The artist's role, for Duchamp, was to imbue pointless objects with intellectual meaning of some sort: those meanings became the art. This was the real reason he came up with the Ready-mades to begin with. As Rosalind Krauss put it, Duchamp sought to "short-circuit" our usual connection between artist and value.^{xix} He moved from purely aesthetic art to art that one needs to think about while abolishing the artist's "mark" from the piece by using mass-produced elements that could be found at any hardware store, such as a bicycle wheel attached to a stool.^{xx} In a world where art is only worth its market value, ready-mades destroy all that is usually seen as "valuable" about art. This was the exact idea the ready-mades were intended to destroy: that of the artist as genius. In a way, though, many people took them as affirming this idea, even bringing it to a whole new level. Since they did not require the hand of the artist, they led to the present day where Damien Hirst never touches a piece until he signs it^{xxi} and sells it (directly) at auction for half a million dollars or more (Figure 14).^{xxii} However, Duchamp simultaneously created an opening in the opposite direction: art can be made by anyone for anyone.

Many people consider Marcel Duchamp's masterpiece to be *La Mariée Mise à Nu Par Ses Célibataires, Même* (*The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelor's, Even*), which is commonly known as *The Large Glass* due to its medium (see Figure 16). Formally, this piece was highly abstracted, to an even greater extent than *Nu descendant un escalier n° 2* (*Nude Descending a Staircase #2*, see Figure 17). Furthermore, the meaning behind the piece was even more abstracted. It seems the title gives a clue, but in fact, none of the figures are clearly recognizable as people. Rather they appear mechanical. Even the title is confusing and

misleading. With this piece, Duchamp made his first attempt at a purely intellectual art work, one in which the visual offering is secondary. To Duchamp, “art is primarily the record of an intellectual process rather than a visual experience,”^{xxiii} which is why he wanted another piece he created, *The Green Box* (see Figure 14) to be included with *The Large Glass*. *The Green Box* was essentially all the notes the artist created in preparation for the creation of *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelor’s, Even*.^{xxiv}

It is easy to see the links between *The Large Glass* and conceptual art, which stripped art to its purely intellectual meaning—just as Marcel Duchamp wanted. As Joseph Kosuth said in 1969, “All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.”^{xxv} The famous example created by Haacke asked viewers entering The Museum of Modern Art to take a poll related to politics. Specifically, the poll was an indirect criticism of one of the members of MoMA’s board of trustees (and Mayor of the city of New York), and his support of the Vietnam War (see Figure 19).^{xxvi} The poll or the results of the poll, are not in and of themselves the “art” in this piece. The art lies in the visitors interacting with Haacke’s query. The public who read the piece’s text would think about their opinion on this topic, as well as related issues. Such thoughts are literally the art of Conceptual Art. Conceptual art in many ways is the culmination of what Duchamp envisioned, and although conceptual art in the contemporary art world has become muddled, it still owes much to Marcel Duchamp.

The reason these works and those that followed in their footsteps are revolutionary is because they cause art to break out of its former boundaries. Where as before, art was something pretty to be looked at, viewed from a distance, and always kept at arm’s length, now, the viewer is *in* the art. Not only is the viewer forced to think, but in fact the art cannot exist without the viewer’s thought. Without these thoughts, it is an unrealized piece.

Although many members of the public find Conceptual art the least accessible of art forms, if they understood the idea behind it, they would realize it could not be more accessible. It is literally whatever they make of it. However, even for the Conceptualists, giving up art entirely and turning to chess would have seemed an abandonment of their tenets, yet for Duchamp, it was anything but.

The classic story of the artist-turned-chess master is a well-known anecdote about the life of Marcel Duchamp. For many studying art, it seems like a betrayal, which Duchamp redeems only at the end of a story which even he could not see. The final art piece, *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° la gaz d'éclairage* (*Given: 1 the waterfall, 2 the illuminating gas*), is revealed, after his death, indicating that his love of chess and distaste for art was a clever ruse. Yet, this is not correct either. As David Joselit so aptly relates, the typical timeline for Marcel Duchamp where he forsakes his first love, art, for his second love, chess, is fundamentally misguided.^{xxvii} Although it is true that for much of his life the artist did not release new pieces of art to the public, it is not true that during this period he abandoned art. It is not even accurate to say he gave up art at all, according to Joselit, who makes the comment that Duchamp always thought like an artist, even while playing chess. Joselit references a photo of Duchamp's studio from 1918, shortly before the artist's renouncement of art: stating "on the side wall, the horizontal grid of a chessboard has been tipped up and hung like a painting—the modernist abstraction par excellence—in order for Duchamp to produce the 'erasable beauty' of chess matches carried out with absent opponents"^{xxviii} (see Figure 22). Indeed, as noted by P.N. Humble in his article on the subject, "it is a matter of historical record that Marcel Duchamp regarded chess as an art form in its own right."^{xxix} In fact, this great thinker conceptualized chess in the same way he saw *The Large Glass*: as intellectual art. In 1952, in his speech to the New York State Chess Association, Duchamp

said, “Beauty in chess does not seem to be a visual experience as in painting. Beauty in chess is closer to beauty in poetry; the chess pieces are the block alphabet, which shapes thoughts.”^{xxx} This makes sense because his art had, for a long time, been moving toward poetry. Indeed, his ready-mades are often described as “visual puns.” A pun, of course, is a literary trope. Any good chess player knows you have to envision what the consequences of your move will be before you make it. This means the art of chess is played out entirely in a player’s head before it actually happens. In fact, this is the thing that appeals to people about chess: infinite combinations are possible and the player is mentally challenged to find the correct one.^{xxxi} This is a primary reason why Duchamp would have chessboards on the walls of his studios as appropriate art for himself—each one is infinitely beautiful, full of possibilities. Duchamp even wrote a poem to describe this idea: “chess= a design on slate/ that one erases,/ the beauty of which/ one can reproduce without the/ intervention of the hand.”^{xxxii}

Once it is accepted that Marcel Duchamp saw chess as art, the question is what other art movements followed this model? The most obvious is the movement known as Performance art, or in its earlier state, “Happenings.” These events are easily the most confusing of art forms, not just for the layperson, but for many people in the art world. However, at their best, these events include those that people can see just walking down the street. Performance art can be interactive, where the audience is actively part of the piece, as with Conceptual Art, or where they remain passive. However, works of Performance art would not exist as such without anyone seeing it, for example, in the famous Chris Burden piece, *Shoot*, if he had simply shot himself, with no one there to watch and no documentation, it would not have been Performance art. Art requires some record, and typically, an audience witnessed Performance art (Figure 23).^{xxxiii}

This type of art, along with Street art, is one of the only free forms of art for the common person to view. The disappointing fact that most people walk by without understanding what is going on or even identifying the event as “art” is unfortunate, but does not negate the actuality of its being worthwhile art.

Marcel Duchamp highlighted a lot of issues that would later become crucial to the art world. He foresaw many of the issues and advantages that would become central to art making. Of foremost importance, he opened the door for art to be made by people without technical training or credentials of any sort, which leveled the playing field for artists. Art became accessible to (and made by) the ordinary man. He helped art get out to many more people than it would have reached before, and essentially changed the rules of art. Art became more accessible, more viewer-centric, and more related to the viewer’s thoughts than ever before. Through his influence, art is on the street and in the minds of people, which is tantamount to having art in one’s everyday life, as William Morris desired. Marcel Duchamp may not have set out to change the art world forever, but he did, and profoundly so.

STREET ART

Despite the best efforts of museum administrators, community outreach specialists and many others, art museums and galleries remain for the most part out of the reach of common people. The reasons for this are numerous: people are intimidated by these “temples,” they feel they do not fit in with the people inside, they have no interest in the art, or they cannot relate to the art and artists found in these institutions. To discuss these perceptions as being either of a true or false nature misses the point that they are true to the people who believe them.

Into this paradigm steps a type of art that is the oldest and yet constantly being reinvented and rediscovered by people walking down the street. This art has been called Fresco, Muralism, Graffiti, and now is known by the newly en vogue term “Street Art.” Most of the artists behind these works have no formal training, are unpaid, and they lack permission to create where they choose. Yet, because this art is both conspicuous and pervasive it is impossible to miss.

My reason for arguing that Street Art belongs in the category of ‘revolutionary art’ is that, like Muralism, Street Art is an art form people can relate to and create for themselves. It is also not dictated by economic value, or at least it was not until recently. After over 30 years of Street Art being done without payment, without restrictions, and free to everyone, some have begun to capitalize on this art form. In many cases, artists have been guilty of this (Shepard Fairey is the best example) but other culprits include gallery owners and museum directors who entice street artists off the street and into institutions. This capitalization has led to a whirlwind of controversy, but there are three particular issues that concern this thesis. One, does putting a monetary value on this art take away from the populist appeal? Two, do street artists who start to make money off their art stop creating art in the streets? Third, in what ways does working within the world of the art market constrict the artists’ freedom of speech?

The first question to tackle about Street Art in galleries is the accessibility of art to communities and how an artist showing his or her art in a gallery or museum can damage that. As Matilda Battersby said in her October 17th, 2010 article for *The Independent*, “a gallery commissioning street art undermines the nature of the genre . . .”^{xxxiv} Battersby’s point is that because Street Art is subversive and adheres to no restrictions, commissioning it will negate both of these qualities and therefore undercut the art itself.^{xxxv} This point is even

more valid when considering the new phenomenon of Street Art as advertisement. The most well-known example of this is Shepard Fairey (see Figure 39), but other artists including Fauxreel have also dabbled in the advertising world. However, the real question it comes down to is: can people still respect the art not knowing which pieces are original and which are commissioned by a company as advertisements?

Now we come to the next issue concerning Street Art in galleries, which is also about respect. Some street artists who begin to make money on their art and are shown in galleries and museums decrease or stop producing art in the street altogether. As Shepard Fairey said in his May 8, 2011 interview with Karen Archey of the *Huffington Post*, “Now I frequently get legal walls to do in a city, but I still go out and look for whatever opportunities present themselves, as well. I have to be really careful, though -- I've been arrested 16 times.”^{xxxvi} This relatively recent caution is understandable but Fairey is not the only famous street artist who is arrested frequently: both “Revok”^{xxxvii} and the French “Space Invader” were arrested because of art they created while in town for the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art’s show “Art in the Streets,” according to the *Los Angeles Times*.^{xxxviii} The anonymity of street artists has long been their only tool in avoiding arrest, and once their names are plastered all over museums and galleries, it is harder to avoid arrest for illegal works they create.^{xxxix}

However, once a street artist is no longer creating art in the streets, how does he or she command respect in an urban environment? Ben Eine, a street artist whose work was gifted to United States President Barack Obama by British Prime Minister David Cameron (see Figure 41), said about his work: “Street art belongs on the street. I'm a working street artist and I earn my money selling art in the style of street art via galleries. I don't get paid for what I do in public places. So I invest the money I earn in galleries back into doing the stuff

I passionately want to do on the street."^{xl} The public can only continue to respect these artists if they are selling work in galleries and other forms (e.g. Fairey's lucrative apparel line) but the money is going towards making more art on the streets, since only then can they be seen as sticking to their principles.

Street Art is still a young art form, but there are many missteps it could make. It is poised on the edge of a precipice. Will it stay humble along with Muralism, in service to communities? Will all the new attention 'go to its head'; and will Street Art wander off into the auction houses and expensive galleries along with the formerly revolutionary movements before it? Or will it find a new compromise?

In the art world of today, art is a commodity and artists are as much a part of institutions and commerce as are stockbrokers. Creating art that is both revolutionary and speaks to the people while not pandering to galleries and auction houses is no easy task. One of the few types of art that is still holding its own in this arena is Street Art. Recently, though, the growing interest in and popularity of this movement endangers its revolutionary potential. Originally, Street Art was the one form of art that did not care if anyone was buying, because its artists were not selling. The kid spray painting, pasting or stenciling on the side of a Wal-Mart does not care what anyone thinks: he's expressing himself. This non-capitalist art form is perfect for radical thinking and political statements. Some artists have been able to remain edgy, despite having work shown in galleries. Whether this will be the trend or the exception remains to be seen.

WHAT WE CAN DO

Art is not about politics and politics is not about art. Completely disconnecting the two is also a mistake, however. In our modern society, politics affect every area of life and

art has the potential to improve every area. This can be a very good connection; William Morris showed how the two could help each other. Unfortunately, with each passing year, more people care less about politics and have less faith that anything will be achieved through them. People have lost hope that they can make a difference, and art is the same: many people think art is above their heads and so they stay away from it.

The fact that artists have lost interest in art for its own sake is not their fault, however, it is simply capitalism at work. As a microcosm for the world, the art market is a great example of what capitalism can do. It can strip people of love for their creations and makes them essentially into machines, as Morris argued so vehemently. This has clearly become accepted in the art world-- Damien Hirst and Takahashi Murakami are two worrisome examples.^{xii}

We are once again in the same place that made William Morris so enraged: people are not given art as their right; they are lent it as a means to the end. Both politics and art need to re-engage people: in my opinion, a melding of politics and art could be the key. This type of art can capture people's attention and make them think, even take action. Art is especially effective with young people and Street Art is a movement that has already gotten their attention. If Street artists use this influence for a purpose, and not lose sight of the reason they began creating art, they could make a difference. In 2008 we saw how Shepard Fairey's campaign poster for Barack Obama's election made a difference with young people and this is just one modest example.^{xiii}

However, it is possible Street Art is not the saviour. If recent events are any indication,^{xiiii} Street Art is about to fall directly into the trap of Pop Art and many other movements before it, where many will no longer respect it.^{xliv} If these artists decide their art

is no longer worthwhile unless they can get gallery representation, its power will be lost. In a gallery, Street Art looks pale and lifeless, like a tree indoors where it is not meant to be^{xlv}

If it is not to be Street Art, hopefully something else will emerge that is revolutionary, an art for the people, and not beyond their grasp. I hope it will be an art that shows the influence from William Morris, Marcel Duchamp and the revolutionary artists in muralism and the beginnings of Street Art.

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- ^{iv} Dalia Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp : art in transit* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1995), 79.
- ^v *ibid.*, 7.
- ^{vi} Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2009), "The Crit."
- ^{vii} Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp*, 2.
- ^{viii} Maynard Solomon, *Marxism and art: essays classic and contemporary* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1979), 84.
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- ^{xi} *ibid.*, 9.
- ^{xii} *ibid.*
- ^{xiii} *ibid.*
- ^{xiv} *ibid.*
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- ^{xvi} Thompson, *The Work of William Morris*, 216.
- ^{xvii} *ibid.*, 219.
- ^{xviii} Dalia Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp: art in transit* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1995), page 2.
- ^{xix} As quoted in "Anti-Kantian Reflexes: Duchamp's New York Dada's Readymades Re-Examined," 161.
- ^{xx} Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp*, vi.
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- ^{xxvi} David Joselit, *American Art Since 1945*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 130.
- ^{xxvii} David Joselit, *Infinite regress: Marcel Duchamp, 1910-1941*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998), 159.
- ^{xxviii} *ibid.*, 158.
- ^{xxix} P. N. Humble, "Marcel Duchamp: Chess Aesthete and Anartist Unreconciled." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* Vol. 32, No. 2 55 University of Illinois Press (Summer, 1998): 41.
- ^{xxx} As quoted in Humble, *Marcel Duchamp*, 43.
- ^{xxxi} Humble, *Marcel Duchamp* 44.
- ^{xxxii} Joselit, *Infinite Regress*, 157.
- ^{xxxiii} Joselit, *American Art Since 1945*, 169.
- ^{xxxiv} Matilda Battersby, "Urban myths: Has street art sold out?" *The Independent*, October 17, 2009,
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