

Conceptual Art is a Crock!

by Joan Altabe



Conceptual art isn't art. It's an idea, often without image or object. Hans Haack conducted a poll on museum goers' opinion of the Vietnam War. See? No art. You may as well write out the idea, which is actually what many conceptual artists do.

Or they present their idea in words and pictures. In the collection of New York's Museum of Modern art is a conceptual piece called "One Chair and Three Chairs by Joseph Kosuth. What you get is a wooden folding chair, a photograph of a wooden folding chair and a photo-enlargement of a dictionary definition of a chair.

OK, not ALL conceptual art makes for an empty viewer experience. Chris Burden's "The Reason for the Neutron Bomb." Fifty thousand matchsticks set on an equal number of nickels, line up like a marine platoon. It looks like machine-gun fire sounds. The viewing experience is similar to looking at unrelieved busy wallpaper. It sends you away from it reeling, even a little nauseous. Which is the appropriate response to observing a military machine bent on wiping out life.

And James Turrell's "Struck Red, Struck Blue" seems like visual organ music. In a darkened room, two narrow panels of fluorescent light – one red, one blue – glow like church windows. You think you hear hymns.

But Marcel Duchamp's exhibit "Fountain" took art down the toilet. Literally. He showed an actual porcelain men's urinal turned upside down and signed it "R. Mutt."

Why? He sought to destroy art's mystique. As he said, "I want to get away from the physical aspect of painting. I'm more interested in ideas in art." This would account for why titles were important to him. Consider "Shaved." You could see his anti-art stance coming when he penciled a mustache and goatee onto a postcard reproduction of "Mona Lisa" and exhibited it under the title "Shaved."

Duchamp freely concedes his cynicism about the value of painting, saying that after some 400 years, it had long since played most of its trump cards. That's when he began his "readymades" – pre-existing, manufactured objects removed from their usual association – and exhibited them in art shows.

His three-dimensional readymades include a

bicycle wheel stuck to a wooden kitchen stool by way of a fork and a small bird cage filled with marble blocks in the shape of lump sugar and some wood, called "Why not Sneeze, Rose Selavy: A made-up name that was a play on the words Rose c'est la vie."

The way Duchamp saw his readymades, they were statements about the state of art, not art itself: "The readymades were a way of getting out of the exchangeability, the monetarization of the work of art...In art, and only in art, the original work is sold, and it acquires a sort of aura that way. But with my readymades, a replica will do just as well."

Duchamp's biographer Robert Lebel summed it up when he said that Duchamp didn't select the bicycle wheel as a beautiful modern object. "It was nothing but a wheel, like a hundred thousand others, and in fact if it were lost it could soon be replaced by identical 'replicas'. For the moment, resting upside down on a kitchen stool as a pedestal, it enjoyed an unexpected and derisive prestige which



Photograph of Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain". *The Blind Man No. 2*, page 4. Editors: Henri-Pierre Roche, Beatrice Wood, and Marcel Duchamp. Published in New York, May 1917 *Fountain by Marcel Duchamp. 1917. Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz.*

depended entirely upon the act of choosing by which it was selected. It was a kind of sacralization."

Are you as sick of this nonsense as I am? Tell me true. 🍷