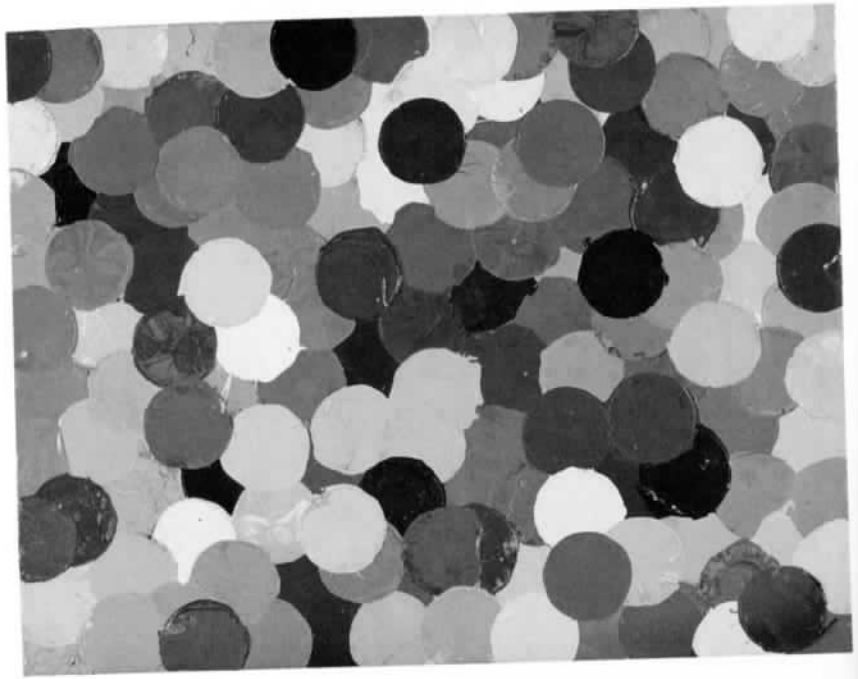

Bernard Frize, *Suite Second (15 No 1)*, 1980, alkyd-methane lacquer on canvas, 50 × 65 cm. Collection Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris (Photo Kleinefenn).

3

The Readymade and the Tube of Paint

The finest colors can be bought ready-made at the Rialto.

—*Tintoretto*[1]

The Missing Link

It took Marcel Duchamp exactly one year, from *Sonate* (Sonata) in August 1911 to *Mariée* (Bride) in August 1912, to make his way through cubism. He had been a rather eclectic painter until then, seemingly uncommitted and not too gifted, either. But the production bracketed by those dates displays an extraordinary and enigmatic concern for painting, cubist in appearance, yet invested with an irony and an eroticism absent in orthodox cubism. It is as if, quite suddenly, a compelling desire to establish his identity as a painter had set in, and as if he understood, albeit unconsciously, that cubism was both the mandatory path

1. Such, in about 1548, was Tintoretto's response to Aretino, who reproached him with not considering color as the ultimate purpose of painting, as did Titian. Quoted in Hans Tietze, *Tintoretto* (London: Phaidon, 1948), p. 43. Jacopo di Robusti's nickname, Tintoretto, came from the fact that he was the son of a dyer.

toward his own identity and a transitional style that avant-garde art would soon abandon, and that he would have to betray at the same time as he adopted it.

Painted in Munich right before the painting entitled *Mariée* and right after the two drawings both called *Vierge* (Virgin), *Le Passage de la vierge à la mariée* (The Passage from Virgin to Bride) signals a crucial point of passage in Duchamp's life and work. It is by far his best canvas (*Mariée* is good too, but slightly more contrived), the only one that measures up to what Picasso and Braque were doing at the time yet borrowing virtually nothing from them. With it, Duchamp accomplished his desire to become a painter worthy of the name while, by the same token, something was revealed to him about painting's loss of historical significance. If you're not a "born painter," if the smell of turpentine doesn't lure you naturally and easily into the studio every morning, as it did Renoir or Picasso, then you have to labor hard toward being born as a painter. But once you're born, once you have witnessed your own birth-to-painting, have taken a revenge against uneven talent and asserted your name as a painter, why do it again? Wouldn't you repeat yourself, "stupid as a painter" (as Duchamp used to say), and indulge in a craftsmanship altogether obsolete as such? For it may well be that in industrialized society, the specialized craft called painting has become useless. Mechanization and division of labor have replaced the craftsman in most of his social and economic functions, so why would they spare the painter? Indeed, to cite but the most blatant specific impact of industrialization on painting, from the moment photography was invented, painters had lost their job as purveyors of resembling images. Their skill had lost its social utility; the pleasure they could take in their work became private enjoyment; the product of their labor had to compete with a cheap ready-made substitute. If you are aware of all this but don't want to renounce the ambition to push painting beyond its loss of social functions and have it carry on a meaningful tradition, then you are bound to feel that it has become impossible to continue trusting your own skill. You might want to acknowledge that the art of painting is dead and switch to something else. The hackneyed issue of the death of painting is inseparable from both the objective conditions that have made painting useless as craft and the subjective feeling that has made it impos-

sible as tradition. If you persisted while ignoring those conditions and denying this feeling, you would do no more than yield to the solitary pleasure that Duchamp called "olfactory masturbation."

Unless, of course—but you don't have to be a born painter for this, Cézanne certainly wasn't—what you do is reinvent painting, give it a new meaning by acknowledging the crisis it is in and give the *idea* of painting, not the craft, new birth with each canvas. You would paint, certainly, but what would you paint? Ideas are not visible; they have neither form nor color. Perhaps you would try to paint the fact that when the machine has supplanted the artisan and the photograph has provided the public with ready-made resemblance, then resemblance can no longer fill the canvas with significant subject matter, then craft can no longer point at referents in the world. But how would you paint that fact, and make that loss visible? You would renounce resemblance and empty the canvas of all concrete references. You would paint reflexively, not transitively. You would conceive of a *Gegenstandslose Welt*, inhabited with forms and colors whose purposiveness is to make visible that, when you paint, you are being guided by the idea of painting as *pure visibility*. Suprematism was the practice of that idea, and so was neoplasticism, so were orphism, simultanism, synchromism, amorphism, unism, and purism in general. The switch to abstract painting comprised the crucial step in the recognition of painting's demise as craft and its instant rebirth as idea. For most of its early practitioners, this switch occurred late in 1912 or early in 1913, and after a passage through cubism, which was also a resistance to it.

Exactly at the same time, in the same cubist context, with the same awareness of the cultural challenge of industrialization and the same mixed feelings about the fate of painting, Duchamp, instead of abandoning figuration, abandoned painting altogether. No sooner had he come back from Munich, in October 1912, than he told himself, "Marcel, no more painting, go get a job."[2]

2. Interview with James Johnson Sweeney, 1956, in *SS*, p. 133. I am aware that Duchamp did not toally abandon painting in 1913, but he certainly abandoned it in a modernist sense. *Tu m'*, 1918, is actually his last oil on canvas.

Two months later, with *Erratum musical* and then with the *Stoppages-étalon* (Standard Stoppages), he started to rely on chance as a substitute for craftsmanship. By the end of 1913, he had almost completely sketched out the project for the *Large Glass* (1915–1923) and had invented his first readymade, the *Bicycle Wheel*. The readymades (and to some extent the *Large Glass*) are the other side of Duchamp's abandonment of painting. If he had relinquished every artistic ambition when he renounced painting, no one would speak of him today. Obviously the readymades are, among other things, Duchamp's way of registering his abandonment of painting, of getting it on the record. If only for this reason, they belong to the history of painting and not, for example, despite their three-dimensional appearance and qualities, to that of sculpture.[3] Duchamp was never a sculptor, but he had been a painter when he quit painting, surrendering, after all, to a pressure that was not different in nature from the pressure to which all the modernist painters before him had yielded when they abandoned history painting, one-point perspective, Euclidian space, or figuration itself. However, though the pressure was similar, the outcome was not, and it may seem far-fetched to claim that the readymades, which clearly are not paintings, show more than negative dependency with regard to the historical sequence they left behind. Duchamp found a way out of painting after having discovered that he was not too gifted, but also after having painted his best two canvases. One may judge that Duchamp's escape is mere escapism, or that it is the sign of his supreme intelligence. However, one would hardly conclude from his abandonment of painting that it establishes a paradoxical link with the history and the tradition with which it breaks. Yet this is what I wish to show. The readymade, on many counts, ought to be reinterpreted today in connection with painting.

3. Their only historical link with sculpture is that they may, in part, stem from the cubist practice of collage. But from the vantage point of 1913, that link is really with the future of sculpture—with Constructivism or *Merz*, for example; they themselves are offspring of cubist *painting*.

Such a reinterpretation by no means exhausts the historical significance of the readymade. But it is a key issue right now, in the face of an artworld in which every five years or so painting alternately agonizes and rises from its ashes. This swing of the pendulum has repeated itself many times in the last thirty years, and each time that the final demise of painting has been announced, the comeback of the readymade or of one of its avatars has been heralded too. Once again these days, an avant-garde strategy, sometimes dubbed "appropriation" and openly indebted to the idea of the readymade, is pitted against a return to painting that equally appropriates the past (though not the same one perhaps) while it disavows the precedent of the readymade.[4] This swing of the pendulum is a symptom. Not only does it indicate that some hidden solidarity must exist between these two trends which apparently negate each other; it also calls for a reexamination of the art-historical context in which the readymade appeared, as an offspring of Duchamp's abandonment of painting. The birth of abstract painting is the relevant context, and as such, it is theoretical and aesthetic as well as art-historical. It revolves around the issue of specificity—or purity—attached to the word "painting."

Although the issue of specificity has presented itself in every art practice during modernity, nowhere has it been more acute than in the practice of painting, where it also presented itself sooner. Modern literature and poetry have sought to isolate and define "the literary" and "the poetic"; modern music has gone after pure "musicality"; modern theater, even, has come to think of itself as the enactment of sheer "theatricality." But it was in painting that this self-referential (better called reflexive) striving for purity became both the exclusive

4. The reception history of the readymade shows several episodes where the idea of appropriation was claimed by some artists and critics to oppose the continuation of the painting tradition. It was called "sovereignty of choice" by André Breton, and in the heyday of conceptual art it was often referred to as "decontextualization" and "recontextualization." But it is in the pop art episode, and especially in its French equivalent, Nouveau Réalisme, that the word "appropriation," thanks for the most part to Pierre Restany, came to be equated with "the readymade strategy."

object of aesthetic theory and the all-encompassing subject matter of practice. In other words, it was in painting and nowhere else (not even in sculpture, which merely took it over from painting), that the idea of abstract art came into being. With abstract *art* emerging around 1912–1913 from cubist (and expressionist) *painting*, a radically new set of aesthetic principles was born, whose ideological justifications were complex and not at all homogeneous but—and this is what matters here—whose claim was that they were generalizable, as a form of thought about art in general rather than as a skill confined to a specific craft. There is a profound paradox in this. For when the early abstractionists spoke of *pure painting*, they understood its specificity to mean that which defines painting *qua* painting, transhistorically and universally: some essence that they supposed to be common to all paintings, regardless of style or period, and apt to distinguish a painting from everything that is not a painting. They also prescribed that the painters' task was to make this essence visible by purifying painting of everything that was not specifically pictorial. They sought the essence of painting—which is merely an idea, a *cosa mentale*—in painting itself, technically, as if it were hidden deep in the structure of matter and had to be purified by narrowing the field of painting technique so as to extract from it some elements, some "pictorial atoms" accounting for its being art. The paradox is thus that such a reduction would open onto the broadest generalization, whose name was abstraction in general. Only when this generalization was achieved in painting did sculpture turn abstract. Perhaps it could have been the other way around (although I doubt it), but it so happens that abstraction was invented by painters. Since then, we have spoken of abstract art, in the singular, as though abstraction as an aesthetic principle had uncovered an essence that was not peculiar to painting but was present in all the arts. Better still, we seem to imply that the various arts, in the plural, are reducible to a single essence called art in general, art at large, as though this essence were not specific but generic. Again, the comparison with what happened in the other arts underlines not the uniqueness of this paradox but that of painting's privilege in this paradox. Though purism in literature may be said to have started with Mallarmé, it is only much later, in the work of Blanchot, Barthes, and Derrida, that "the poetic" got generalized way beyond the boundaries of poetry and became "the text." Though the search

for the "musicality" of music may be said to have started when Schönberg dismantled traditional harmony and invented twelve-tone music, it is only with John Cage that "sound" in general became both a musical object and the subject matter of the composer's practice. And though "theatricality" had been a topic of reflection for many modern playwrights and directors including Brecht, Artaud, and Stanislawski, it is only with the advent of "happenings" and "performance art" that one sought a generalization that would lead outside the tradition of theater. (Interestingly enough, it also came from outside, namely from painting and sculpture.) As names, "the text," "sound," and perhaps "happening" (less so "performance") indicate the same desire for generalization, paradoxically grounded in the striving for purity, as that encountered in the history of painting. They also indicate the same desire to expand what is considered artistic and to annex mundane, nonartistic matter, while reducing their own field to some specific and irreducible "essence." But for innumerable reasons, the names they secured for those paradoxical reductions/expansions remained specific. If, for example, "sound" in general is now regarded by many musicians as a legitimate definition of their domain, if some musicians, even, prefer to call their work "sound" rather than "music," no musician would claim that what he or she is doing is "art" and nothing but "art."[5] The readymades, by contrast, are "art" and nothing but "art." Whereas an abstract painting reduced to a black square on a white background is art only when you accept seeing it as a painting, a urinal is a sculpture only when you accept seeing it as art. Otherwise it simply remains a urinal. The generic seems to precede the specific.

Genus and species are names, proper names.[6] You don't call a black square a painting in the way you would call a table a table; you baptize it a painting

5. This may not be entirely true. La Monte Young is still considered a musician, but Max Neuhaus is regarded as an "artist who works with sound." There are other such cases, and they always concern people whose career developed within the "artworld," not the musical world. The legitimation for this state of things can be traced to John Cage and from Cage, of course, to Duchamp.

6. See chapter 1.

out of aesthetic conviction. You call Malevich an artist through the same judgment that makes you call him a painter. Logically, if not chronologically, he is a painter first. With the legitimation of Duchamp's readymades, a very different situation was seemingly made legitimate, a situation about which, I believe, one should never stop wondering and perhaps worrying: you can now be an artist without being either a painter, or a sculptor, or a composer, or a writer, or an architect—an artist at large. What has made this situation plausible? To answer that Duchamp liberated subsequent artists from the constraints of a particular art—or skill—is either begging the question or failing to take responsibility for endorsing this "liberation." You might as well accept that anything goes. The plausibility in question has to be a regulative idea authorizing "as if–comparisons" between things that are out there, in the world at large, and things that were already plausible candidates for the title of art, because they partook in a specific craft conventionally recognized as an art form. It is again a matter of what Duchamp called an "algebraic comparison," like the one that allows us to judge *Fountain* in reference to the *Nude Descending a Staircase*. In other words, to justify the plausibility of someone deserving to be called an artist, without being a practitioner of a given art, is to show that somewhere there hides a missing link between the generic and the specific, between art in general and one or more of the arts in particular. Where shall we look for this missing link? The historical evidence points not at music, nor at literature, nor even at sculpture, but rather at painting. Duchamp himself was a painter before he became an "artist." Lest he be accused of being a fraud, his work ought to reveal the hidden link between *painting* and *art*.

Pure Color Is to Pure Painting What Abstraction Is to Art in General

Specificity or purity was painting's major regulative idea when it switched to abstraction. Regulative ideas should not be confused with rules or criteria. Just as imitation, for example, was a regulative idea for classical painting and not simply a rule to abide by or to transgress, so abstraction, pure visibility, integrity

of the picture plane, faithfulness to materials, "less is more," and so on, have been major regulative ideas for modern painting. Now, a very wide array of painted artifacts—belonging to different times, done in different techniques, partaking in different cultures, and proceeding from regulative ideas as different and opposed as imitation and abstraction—still have in common that they have been judged worthy of bearing the same name, painting, and in the eyes of modern Westerners this is what makes them belong to the same specific tradition. The history of painting is the jurisprudence that passed on the name "painting" along with the objects so called, in spite of all the breaks that have occurred in this tradition—called by some revolutions, by others paradigm shifts, but which are better described as major changes in regulative ideas. What emerged with modernity is that the practice of painting gradually became more and more regulated by the idea of its own specificity, or purity, or autonomy, in a reflexive application of the idea of painting upon its name. This tendency peaked with the foundation of abstract painting, when a whole generation of painters all of a sudden had the strongest feeling that they were dropping all their conventions at once, to leap into an unknown territory where comparison with the past was no longer possible. At that moment, calling their work by the name of painting, and even of "pure painting," explicitly became the key issue of the artist's (and the viewer's) aesthetic judgments—explicitly, yet to some extent unconsciously. What occupied the consciousness of the various founders of abstract painting was the ideas regulating their judgments and the feelings through which these ideas were themselves evaluated. Fondness for design and color, a sense of respect for the flat surface, the joy of discovery and exploration were certainly among those feelings, but a much stronger incentive was fear and hope: fear that a craft reduced to the mere coating of a surface bearing no resemblance to the outer world would no longer deserve its name, and hope that it could be redeemed if it could only prove meaningful. Thus, what occupied the mind of the first abstractionists was their anxiety to prove that a surface, covered with colors, that had abandoned every readable link with nature was nevertheless "readable," that it was a language of sorts. Hence, for example, Mondrian's attempts to establish the universal linguistic value of his vertical/

horizontal symbolism or, more significantly, of his triad of primary colors. For Mondrian and for virtually every founder of abstract art, primary colors, or color itself, in the singular—pure color as it was called—became the basic signifier of the new language, the "essential," "natural," metonym for pure painting. Whether an act of faith or a profession of hope, the idea that there is such a thing as pure color—as transcendental foundation authorizing the plurality of all empirical colors—was what set purism, as a regulative idea, into motion. So the search for the essence of painting comprised its own "as if–comparison," at once substituting a new, unknown territory for the one mapped by all the painting of the past and authorizing a generalization which would sweep through all the arts: pure color is to pure painting what abstraction is to art in general. Further, the interpretation of pure color as the elementary signifier of a new visual language offered itself to most pioneers of abstraction as the best available rationalization of this "as if–comparison" and, by the same token, as the best legitimation ensuring that the new language be called painting in its own right, in other words, that it be art.

Thus Kandinsky, anticipating the advent of abstract painting as early as 1904, boldly prophesied:

> If destiny will grant me enough time I shall discover an international language which will endure forever and which will continually enrich itself. And it will not be called Esperanto, its name will be *Malerei* [painting]—an old word that has been misused. It should have been called *Abmalerei* [non-painting, counterfeit]; up till now it has consisted of imitating. Color was seldom used for a composition (or, if so, it was used unconsciously).[7]

It is obvious from this passage that color, used consciously and outside the conventions of imitation, was intended to be the cornerstone of a new international

7. Quoted in Hans K. Roethel and Jean K. Benjamin, *Kandinsky* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1979), p. 13.

language that would at last deserve the name of painting. In *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (On the Spiritual in Art), written between 1909 and 1911 and published late in 1911, Kandinsky, who kept postponing the actual passage to abstraction out of fear that it might be confused with decorative art, nevertheless proceeded to lay down the theoretical—or ideological—bases upon which abstract painting was to be grounded as, to quote the title of chapter 6, "the language of forms and colors." His argument starts with a color's name: "When one hears the word red, this red in our imagination has no boundaries. One must, if necessary, force oneself to envisage them."[8] It then proceeds to link this very abstract work of the imagination with the formal and material conditions that could make it into the basic element of an immanent pictorial language: "If, however, this red has to be rendered in material form (as in painting), then it must (1) have a particular shade chosen from an infinite range of different possible shades of red . . . ; and (2) be limited in its extension upon the surface of the canvas, limited by other colors that are there of necessity."[9] Linguists would say that what Kandinsky does in this passage is establish the paradigmatic and syntagmatic conditions of pure color as a language. It is as if he had read Roman Jakobson and had posited the linguist's axes of selection and combination as the linguistic transcendentals that, in his mind, would soon constitute the objective foundation for a universal language deserving to be called *Malerei*, not Esperanto.

Looking back, as early as 1913, upon his foundation of the abstract language of pure painting, Kandinsky stressed the subjective aspects of his passage to abstraction, aspects much more important to him, even, than the "objective" or "linguistic" ones, because without them the language of abstract painting would forever lack "inner necessity," like Esperanto. In *Rückblicke* (Reminiscences), he recalls a few intense aesthetic experiences that he sees in hindsight were endowed with enough inner necessity to have justified his

8. Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, in *Kandinsky, Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1982), 1:162.

9. Ibid., p. 163.

passage to pure painting. One of them, dated from adolescence, is described as follows:

> As a 13- or 14-year old boy, I gradually saved up enough money to buy myself a paintbox containing oil paints. I can still feel today the sensation I experienced then—or, to put it better, the experience I underwent then—of paints *emerging from the tube.* One squeeze of the fingers, and out came *these strange beings,* one after the other, *which one calls colors*—exultant, solemn, brooding, dreamy, self-absorbed, deeply serious, with roguish exuberance, with a sigh of release, with a deep sound of mourning, with defiant power and resistance, with submissive suppleness and devotion, with obstinate self-control, with sensitive, precarious balance, living an independent life of their own, with all the necessary qualities for further, autonomous existence, prepared to make way readily, in an instant, for new combinations, to mingle with one another and create an infinite succession of new worlds.[10]

Lyrical as it is, and written in hindsight, this text roots the very foundation of the abstract language in a personal—undoubtedly mythified—aesthetic experience that links the naming of painting to that of color. Color is thought of as a strange living being, autonomous and rich with all its pictorial potential. In Kandinsky's memory, it is also seen as bursting out of the tube, virgin, as it were, yet propelled by "inner necessity." The text presents the tube of paint, then the palette,[11] next the virgin canvas,[12] and finally the brush, not as the tools

10. *Reminiscences,* ibid., pp. 371–372 (my italics).

11. "Praise be to the palette for the delights it offers; formed from the elements defined above, it is itself a 'work,' more beautiful indeed than many a work." Ibid., p. 372.

12. "At first, [the canvas] stands there like a pure, chaste maiden, with clear gaze and heavenly joy—this pure canvas that is itself as beautiful as a picture." Ibid.

of the painter, as one might expect, but as metonyms of potential yet accomplished paintings. But the tube of paint, the palette, the canvas and the brush are also the protagonists of an erotic saga which the rest of the text then unfurls, with a dubious lyricism infused with machismo and colonialism: "And then comes the imperious brush, conquering [the canvas] gradually, first here, then there, employing all its native energy, like a European colonist who with axe, spade, hammer, saw penetrates the virgin jungle where no human foot has trod, bending it to conform to his will."[13]

The Readymade Is to Art in General What the Tube of Paint Is to Modern Painting

To an eye more skeptical and less enthusiastic than Kandinsky's, the passage to abstract painting thus appears to be of the kind ironically referred to in Duchamp's *Passage from Virgin to Bride.* No artist could be more diametrically opposed to Kandinsky than Duchamp. His own brand of colonialism ("*Le nègre aigrit, les négresses maigrissent . . .* ") resembles that of Raymond Roussel in *Impressions d'Afrique* (1910). And his own brand of self-defeating machismo ("*On a que: pour femelle, la pissotière et on en vit*") would leave the "rapist" a bachelor keeping his hands busy with "olfactory masturbation." For Kandinsky's abstract expressionism, for Malevich's suprematism, for Mondrian's neoplasticism and for all the purisms that sprang between 1912 and 1914 from the idea of pure color, Duchamp substituted eroticism, which, as he very seriously explained to Pierre Cabanne, he wanted to turn into a new artistic "ism."[14] And when he was asked to define eroticism, he answered with a comparison and an example.

13. Ibid., pp. 372–373.

14. "I believe in eroticism a lot, because it's truly a rather widespread thing throughout the world, a thing that everyone understands. It replaces, if you wish, what other literary schools called Symbolism, Romanticism. It could be another 'ism,' so to speak. You're going to tell me that there can be eroticism in Romanticism, also. But if eroticism is used as a principal basis, a principal end, then it takes the form of an 'ism,' in the sense of a school." *PC,* p. 88.

Not by chance, and just as in Kandinsky's recollection, this example was the tube of paint: "Eroticism is close to life, closer than philosophy or anything like it; it's an animal thing that has many facets and is pleasing to use, as you would use a tube of paint, to inject into your production, so to speak."[15]

Duchamp painted *Le Passage de la vierge à la mariée* in Munich, where he could have met Kandinsky. It is unlikely that he did so, but there is some evidence that he bought *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* in Munich, in the second edition dated May 1912, and that he annotated it in the margins, trying to translate some passages. Even if we had no biographical support at all, it would still be obvious, I believe, that *Le Passage de la vierge à la mariée* has everything to do with the passage of a whole generation of painters into abstract art. The dates coincide perfectly. As far as the Parisian painters are concerned, Duchamp's transit through cubism is congruent with that of Delaunay, Mondrian, and Herbin, and it seems unbelievable that Duchamp would not have been taking note of what was happening around him. Moreover, Kupka's studio was next to his brothers' house. And as far as Munich is concerned, it is very possible that the issue of pure color, repressed in the Parisian cubist context but highly visible in the context of the Blaue Reiter group, triggered an intuition at the same time very close to that founding Kandinsky's "language of forms and colors," and yet diametrically opposed to it. In *Le Passage de la vierge à la mariée,* and especially in its title (titles were, as Duchamp always said, a way of adding to the painting "a color which had not come out of a tube"), one already recognizes a typically Duchampian way of handling *allegorical appearance*. In seeing color burst out of the tube, or in discovering one of his figurative canvases lying on its side in the twilight of the studio, Kandinsky underwent a spiritual revelation authorizing the coming into being of abstract painting. He deferred acting on this revelation, but he had understood, very early on, that what was at issue in the passage to abstraction was that painting would at last

15. "Marcel Duchamp Speaks," interview by George Heard Hamilton and Richard Hamilton, London, BBC, 1959; published in *Audio Arts Magazine* 2, no. 4, (1976).

deserve its name, *Malerei*. What Duchamp got out of *Le Passage de la vierge à la mariée* was the same revelation with an ironic, sceptical twist: indeed, the tradition of craftsmanship that had been called painting until then, and that Kandinsky called *Abmalerei,* was no longer viable. Indeed, what was at stake if painting wanted to survive was that it once again deserved its name, *Malerei*. But did it deserve to survive at all? And could it survive if one didn't first acknowledge whence the death sentence had come? In any case, to allow painting to survive was not to dream that it be born again, springing from a brand-new tube of paint like Venus from the ocean, as though before the advent of pure painting there had been only *Abmalerei*. It was not to succumb to the fatal attraction of the virgin canvas and to rape it, nor to construct a yet unspoken language on a tabula rasa. If painting was a *bride,* painters were her *bachelors*. Separation between the lovers had to be recognized first, as the condition of *eroticism,* humorously understood as a new artistic "ism," along with *ironism, oculism* and, as we shall see, *pictorial nominalism*. First of all, the name of painting had to be recorded in such a way that it significantly referred its degraded tradition to the very conditions that had made it objectively useless and subjectively impossible to pursue.

In the aftermath of Munich came Duchamp's abandonment of painting and, a little later, his invention of the readymade. Only many years later, when the readymade had left its indelible imprint on modern art history and Duchamp had achieved the reputation of the world's most influential artist, did he, tongue-in-cheek, give "little explanations" of the readymade that are absolutely luminous when read literally. In an interview with Georges Charbonnier in 1961, Duchamp stated:

> The word "art," etymologically speaking, means to make, simply to make. Now what is making? Making something is choosing a tube of blue, a tube of red, putting some of it on the palette, and always choosing the quality of the blue, the quality of the red, and always choosing the place to put it on the canvas, it's always choosing. So in order to choose, you can use tubes of paint, you can

> use brushes, but you can also use a ready-made thing, made either mechanically or by the hand of another man, even, if you want, and appropriate it, since it's you who chose it. Choice is the main thing, even in normal painting.[16]

If the word "art" means making, and if making means choosing, then we are left to draw the most general conclusion possible: art means choosing. But what is striking, in regard to this level of generality, is the extreme particularity of the chosen example: "Making something is choosing a tube of blue, a tube of red . . ." It is as if art in general could stem only from choices specific to painting. "Choice is the main thing, even in normal painting." Through an analogy Duchamp invites, one is led to think that the readymade is a sort of abnormal painting. Of pictorial descent, it would be the generic offspring of choices that engender art only if they are specific. In an interview with Katherine Kuh in May 1961, Duchamp, playing ingénue, inverted this kinship: before color engenders "normal" painting, it is born out of a ready-made tube. And so the choice of a readymade is analogous to that of a tube of paint, because the tube of paint was a readymade in the first place:

> Let's say you use a tube of paint; you didn't make it. You bought it and used it as a readymade. Even if you mix two vermilions together, it's still a mixing of two readymades. So man can never expect to start from scratch; he must start from ready-made things like even his own mother and father.[17]

Nothing is *sui generis*, and likewise, no art can be made on a tabula rasa. Just as no one can avoid carrying the Oedipal weight of "mother and father," so the

16. Marcel Duchamp, interview by Georges Charbonnier, radio interviews, RTF, 1961 (my translation).

17. Interview by Katherine Kuh, in *The Artist's Voice Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 90.

painter too bears the burden of tradition. And just as mother and father are "ready-made things," whose heredity one has received, so is tradition. It has been handed over to the painter, as though encapsulated in a ready-made tube of paint. And again, the analogy is inverted: if the painter has inherited a tradition that is already made, then no matter what he does, even "normal painting," he will end up doing a modified readymade. At the Symposium on the Art of Assemblage, in October 1961, Duchamp concluded:

> Since the tubes of paint used by the artists are manufactured and ready-made products we must conclude that all paintings in the world are "readymades aided" and also works of assemblage.[18]

Here is the reason why the whole tradition of painting now amounts to one large readymade. Just as the prerequisite of the painter's work is a manufactured product, so "all paintings in the world" now partake of an industrial culture. An artist who has stopped painting but now chooses a readymade thus belongs to the same tradition as the painter, because the fact that colors are produced industrially both annihilates this tradition and sets up its new conditions. Painters have been dispossessed of their tradition by the paint manufacturers, as Duchamp wittily implied in an interview with Francis Roberts in October 1963:

> A readymade is a work of art without an artist to make it, if I may simplify the definition. A tube of paint that an artist uses is not made by the artist; it is made by the manufacturer that makes paints. So the painter really is making a readymade when he paints with a manufactured object that is called paints. So that is the explanation.[19]

18. "A propos of Readymades," in *SS*, p. 142.

19. Marcel Duchamp, "I Propose to Strain the Laws of Physics," interview by Francis Roberts, *Art News* 67 (December 1968): 47.

Indeed, as in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter,* the explanation stares us in the face. The analogy had to be read literally. Not that from now on we are to take all paintings for "readymades aided," or the readymades for "unaided" paintings. But the clue was certainly there to be picked up, all the more so since Duchamp, of course, carefully refrained from ever producing a tube of paint as a readymade. Asked for a definition of the readymade, Duchamp answered with an example instead. Asked about a generality, he answered with a singularity. Asked how he would justify the existence of an art that would no longer be either painting or sculpture or anything specific, but instead simply generic, he replied with an analogy establishing an *algebraic comparison* between the specific and the generic: what the choice of a "tube of blue, a tube of red" is to painting, the choice of a bottle rack or of a snow shovel is to art at large. One cannot help but see in this *algebraic comparison* an ironic mimicry of the modernist regulative idea: pure color is to pure painting what abstraction is to art in general. Duchamp's timely response to the birth of abstraction was an object of pictorial extraction. For Duchamp as for Kandinsky, the tube of paint is the locale of an initial choice in which the making of a painting is grounded. But where for Kandinsky it is an origin, for Duchamp it is a given. For both artists the tube of paint refers to pure color. But for Kandinsky, pure color is the elementary signifier of a pictorial language reduced to its essence; for Duchamp, it is the unmixed pigment whose purity has been determined by the manufacturer, not by the painter. For both artists, the tube of paint is charged with erotic potency. But the lyrical eroticism with which Kandinsky saw color burst out of the tube, burgeoning and inseminating the canvas, is here castrated: not only does Duchamp's tube remain sealed, it also remains concealed in every readymade, as a secret example of choices that of course the artist never acted out, and of which snow shovels and bottle racks are the *allegorical appearance.* It is not the tube of paint that inseminates the canvas as if it were erotic in and of itself; it is eroticism that "is pleasing to use, as you would use a tube of paint, to inject into your production, so to speak." And so the allegory works both ways: as much as it is true that "all paintings in the world are 'readymades aided,'" it is

equally true that all readymades are offsprings of painting, once painting has been abandoned for its objective uselessness and its subjective impossibility.

Nowhere is the difference in ideology between Kandinsky and Duchamp more visible than in the opposition of these two descriptions of pure color: Kandinsky's "strange beings . . . which one calls colors" are Duchamp's "manufactured object that is called paints." Pure color was a regulative idea in Kandinsky's practice, and he felt obliged to justify it by giving it the ontological status of a living being; but for Duchamp, it was flatly a thing, already made, a dead commodity. And what the one called "colors," the other called "paints." When Duchamp abandoned painting, he did a lot more than just renounce the craft and the skill for which he realized he was, after all, not too gifted. He switched from one regulative idea to another by giving that of his colleagues, the early abstractionists, an additional reflexive twist which turned it into a referent for his own idea. Their regulative idea was the specifically pictorial; his was *about* the specifically pictorial. Theirs was geared to establish their craft's name, *Malerei;* his was a philosophy *about* that name, *a kind of pictorial Nominalism.*[20] In pure color liberated from imitation, in elementary forms, they sought the conditions for "an international language which will endure forever." Instead, he *referred* to those conditions and provided an ironic commentary on their utopian quest for a language that would have, as Lévi-Strauss put it in *Le cru et le cuit,* only one level of articulation: "Conditions of a language: the search for 'prime words' ('divisible' only by themselves and by unity)."[21] Proper names

20. The note from the *White Box,* "*Une sorte de* Nominalisme pictural (*contrôler*)," is dated 1914 (*SS,* p. 78). The word "nominalism" appears in two other notes: note 185 (also dated 1914) and note 251 (undated), published posthumously in M. Duchamp, *Notes,* presented by Paul Matisse (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1980).

21. *SS,* p. 31. To understand how Duchamp's regulative idea could take Kandinsky's as a referent is again (see chapter 2) a matter of linking two "algebraic comparisons": there is the same relation for Kandinsky between the name of a color and its purity ("When one hears the word red . . .") as there is for Duchamp between his "prime words" ("the colors one

satisfy these conditions, but whereas for the founders of abstraction what mattered was that the proper name of painting be maintained in its ambition and dignity, even though it had ceased to refer to anything but a mere surface covered with pure colors and basic forms, what was at stake for Duchamp was to assert that the proper name of art—or of *arrhe*—be given to a practice that no longer *was* painting, but that was *apropos* of painting.

L'IMPOSSIBILITÉ DU FER

Thus, the readymade is art about painting even before it is art about art. The art of painting means making, said Duchamp, thereby quoting a very traditional definition of art as skill and craftsmanship. But if craftsmanship has been rendered objectively useless by industrialization, then skillful making must also be subjectively felt as impossible by the sensitive artist. This is, "even in normal painting," that "inner necessity" which drove Kandinsky and the other early abstractionists toward the abandonment of almost every traditional convention of painting, and Duchamp toward the abandonment of the craft itself. Gone is the making, what remains is the name. Gone is the skill, the talent, what remains is the genius, the wit. Asked by Denis de Rougemont to define genius, Duchamp replied with a pun: "*l'impossibilité du fer*" (the impossibility of the iron / *l'impossibilité du faire,* the impossibility of the making).[22] Since making means choosing, the implied syllogism leads to the conclusion that genius lies in the impossibility of choosing. And since the privileged example of such an impossible choice is "a tube of blue, a tube of red," then genius must lie in the impossibility of choosing one's colors, of opening a tube, of beginning a canvas, of painting. Where impotent talent forces the painter to quit, the genius

speaks about," he says elsewhere) and the "purity" of the color still in its tube. Both relations set "the conditions of a language." But Duchamp's is a "metalanguage": it is *about* Kandinsky's.

22. Denis de Rougemont, "Marcel Duchamp, mine de rien," *Preuves* 204 (February 1968): 45. (Written in 1945 but not published before 1968.)

of impotence takes over! There is an undeniable element of retaliation—of *talionism* (another artistic "ism"), as Duchamp used to say—in *pictorial nominalism*. Duchamp knew that he would never equal Picasso or Matisse even when he painted his best two canvases in Munich in August 1912. He didn't renounce his ambition for that. In quitting painting, he showed his extreme intelligence, his extreme pride, certainly, but also his extreme humility. He didn't dissuade other artists from holding on to painting. Some would do so, having an understanding of painting's impossibility at least equal to his (I am thinking of Pollock, mainly). His *talionism* was directed only against his own failure. But his *ironism* was such that painting after Duchamp, as if nothing had happened, became precisely impossible to anyone who had the ambition but perhaps not the talent of Picasso or Matisse. To paint after Duchamp means to paint in the hostile conditions set up by industrialization. Duchamp cannot be made responsible for those conditions; he simply showed them, and herein lies his genius.[23] But he would have shown nothing had he not succeeded in recording the *impossibility of the making* by making something nonetheless; and he would not have evoked genius—albeit the genius of impotence—had the double entendre in the pun, *the impossibility of the iron,* not incited those who could hear it to look for some object with which to pry open to interpretation this *Witz* (joke) made of iron and irony.

At least two of Duchamp's readymades are "three-dimensional puns" (as Arturo Schwarz said, perhaps quoting Duchamp) made of iron. *Trébuchet* (Trap, 1917) is a coatrack nailed to the floor so that one stumbles (*trébucher*) on it.[24] And *Peigne* (Comb, 1916) is an iron comb whose interpretation reveals, I believe, the

23. This is the genius we spontaneously recognize when we speak of "art after Duchamp" being different from "art before Duchamp." Such periodizations of art history by way of a proper name are not accounted for by the art-historical notion of influence.

24. When Duchamp had a replica of *Trébuchet* made by the Galleria Schwarz, Milan, in 1964, he specified on the blueprint, "*Fer ordinaire clair, pas cuivre*" (Ordinary light iron, not copper). The blueprint is reproduced on the inside cover of Walter Hopps, Ulf Linde, and Arturo Schwarz, *Marcel Duchamp, Ready-Mades, Etc. (1913–1964)* (Milan: Galleria Schwarz, 1964).

full implications of genius understood as *l'impossibilité du fer.* It is similar to those combs used by the cubists to paint fake wood, aware that they were introducing into the noble craft of painting a practice that was of a very different social origin. The cubists' comb is to Kandinsky's brush what the house-painter is to the artist-painter. It is unfit to be erected into a metonym of pure painting but, on the other hand, perfectly suited to act as a signifier for the plight shared by both the house-painter and the artist-painter, since they are both craftsmen threatened by mechanization. Painting fake wood by hand was already obsolete in 1912, as Braque and Picasso demonstrated by juxtaposing in their collages pieces of ready-made woodgrained wallpaper and hand-made *trompe-l'oeil* skillfully imitated by means of an iron comb. As to Duchamp's comb, nobody ever used it to paint. Once chosen as a readymade, nobody would use it as a comb either. Born out of the cubist collages, *Peigne* is a "three-dimensional pun," in the shape of a comb, referring to the collages and their pictorial origin. In French, the name of the object reads as a *Witz* on painting. Indeed, *Peigne* is the subjunctive mode of the verb *peindre* (to paint), either in the first or in the third person. It could be read as "*qu'il peigne!*" (let him paint!) and might be referring to Picasso who, not lacking wit himself, had used a comb to paint the hair and the mustache of his *Poet,* a painting from 1912. Such a reading would be confirmed by the fact that to Picasso's painted/combed *Poet,* Duchamp apparently replied with an enameled one. It was to be *Apolinère Enameled,* an assisted readymade made towards the end of 1916: a can of paint in her hand, a little girl paints a bed frame that looks as fantastic with regard to perspective as does Picasso's cubism. Duchamp, who had ceased to paint, merely chose a small poster advertising Sapolin pigments, a French brand of paints manufactured in the United States by Gerstendorfer Brothers.[25] Yet he scribbled, by

25. We owe it to André Gervais (*La raie alitée d'effets* [Montreal: HMH, 1984], p. 116) to have discovered that the two lines (in the lower right-hand corner) whose letters were modified by Duchamp in order to compose the cryptic phrase ANY ACT RED BY HER TEN OR EPERGNE were to be read originally as MANUFACTURED BY GERSTENDORFER BROS. As to the title itself,

mirrorical return, the shuffled hair of the little girl in a corner of the mirror, as if he wanted to underline that it needed some combing. And likewise, he scribbled other hairy appendages onto a reproduction of the Mona Lisa two years later. Countless are the works by Duchamp in which his witty genius took as referent the impossible act of painting/combing, varying on the act and the pilosities it acts on: he wore a star-shaped tonsure; he got himself photographed with shampoo on his head; he shaved the Mona Lisa's mustache as well as the Bride's crotch. This is enough, I believe, to verify in his work the resonance of a *Witz* that, on February 17, 1916, was perhaps no more than a Freudian slip betraying his regrets.

For *Peigne* is dated. It is the only readymade for which Duchamp obeyed the rule that he had given himself in a note from the *Green Box* where he defined the readymade as *a kind of rendezvous.*[26] In this note he planned, *for a moment to come (on such a day, such a date, such a minute), to "inscribe a readymade,"* adding this instruction: *naturally inscribe that date, hour, minute, on the readymade, as information.* Date, hour, minute—FEB. *17 1916 11* AM—are indeed inscribed on the comb, which would be the only strict enactment of the *rendezvous* he had set himself with a readymade, if *Peigne* had not been inscribed eleven days, exactly, after he did another readymade, equally inscribed with the date, hour, minute, and precisely entitled *Rendez-vous du 6 février 1916 à 1h.3/4 après-midi.* It is a literary work, and one might call it a poem, though Duchamp called it a readymade. In any case, it is a text, typewritten on four postcards and addressed to Walter Arensberg, who was then heavily involved in deciphering cabbalistic poetry. It was painstakingly composed through the following method: Duchamp decided that he would write sentences, grammatically correct but making no sense at all, not even nonsense. An impossible task if ever there was

Apolinère Enameled, it is of course both a modification of the original advertisement, *Sapolin Enamels,* and a pun on the name of the French poet Apollinaire.

26. SS, p. 32. The note itself is undated, but too many coincidences lead me to believe that it was written a few weeks, perhaps a few months, prior to *Peigne.*

one: having chosen the first word of the sentence, Duchamp would then proceed to choose the next, scratching every choice until he was satisfied that no meaning was produced but an *abstract* one.[27] Such a method is both close to and diametrically opposed to André Breton's automatic writing. (Moreover, it anticipates the surrealist technique.) Whereas Breton, thinking that he could let the unconscious flow into his poems simply by obeying the Freudian principle of free association, never achieved much more than a display of the preconscious and its resistances, Duchamp, practicing "overcensorship" (*surcensure:* his word), forced himself to put the most drastic constraints on his associations, to the point where virtually every word that slipped through could be said to be significant, like an overdetermined lapsus. And in the text that is the product of this contrived "impossibility of the making," we find this sentence, which is anything but abstract: "*Conclusion: après maints efforts en vue du peigne, quel dommage*" (Conclusion: after many efforts toward the comb, what a pity).

Eleven days later, this slip of the tongue became a "three-dimensional pun." The proximity of the two works leaves no doubt that what is referred to in *Peigne* is an intricate set of feelings towards painting, involving joy, irony, and revenge but also nostalgia, jealousy, and impotence. Perhaps Duchamp had Picasso and his *Poet* in mind when he let the pun in the comb's name be read as "*qu'il peigne!*" But he was certainly addressing himself too, and "*que je peigne!*" is a more likely and a more profound reading. Its best translation would be something between "I ought to paint" and "If only I could paint." The slip of the tongue (by then, probably a feigned one) was a stroke of genius—genius, whose Duchampian definition, pun included, lies in *l'impossibilité du fer.* Painting has become impossible, the *Witz* seems to say: the verb "to paint" can no longer

27. "There would be a verb, a subject, a complement, adverbs and everything perfectly correct, as such, as words, but meaning in these sentences was a thing I had to avoid. . . . The verb was meant to be an abstract word acting on a subject that is a material object; in this way the verb would make the sentence look abstract." Quoted in Schwarz, *Complete Works,* p. 457.

be conjugated in the indicative, but rather is alluded to in the subjunctive, a verbal mode that in French also acts as a hypothetical imperative.

But painting has not become impossible. The fact that industrialization has bereft painters of their traditional social function as purveyors of images—the fact, for example, that photography has taken over the market for portraits and other representations—does not in the slightest make the practice of painting objectively impossible. It makes it useless in regard to this traditional function, but it does not forbid it nor does it ipso facto suppress its know-how or repress the desire to paint. On the contrary, it can be argued that economic progress has made it possible for many more people to find the leisure to paint than was ever the case prior to the industrial revolution. The impossibility of painting is merely a feeling, the subjective signal accompanying the awareness of its objective uselessness in a society where the production of images has been mechanized and from which painting has withdrawn, like a relic from an obsolete artisanal past. Though merely a feeling, the impossibility of painting is a mandatory feeling, however, a quasi-moral one, a feeling that should be felt by any artist who is sensitive to his or her time, to the inventions that propel it towards economic progress, to the ideas that carry the hope of social progress, to the technologies that upset the cultural status quo. It is, in other words, the feeling of any artist who, like Duchamp, around 1912, understands or senses that there is more art in photography or cinema than there is in painting because these new cultural forms, far from being deprived of social function, allow a glimpse of the possibility of a truly popular art. Thus, *l'impossibilité du fer* is not at all a logical modality; it does not entail the negative necessity of that which cannot happen. Rather, it connotes the moral imperative of that which should not happen. The melancholic feeling of impotence the sensitive artist must feel in the face of painting's objective uselessness forbids him or her to paint, but it is not as if one could no longer paint. Rather, it is as if one should not paint yet. Painting may be doomed by industrialization, but as long as the desire, the drive, or the impulse to paint survives, to abandon painting means to postpone actual work. The tubes of paint remain sealed and the canvas remains blank, and as such, they retain their potential. Duchamp's *Peigne*—both the object and

the pun in its title—is the work in which he recorded his abandonment of painting and made it significant. Referring to cubism and to its abstract aftermath, it is the most extraordinary allegorical condensation of the two main *topoi* of pictorial purism, the tabula rasa and the last painting. Duchamp refrained from painting so that painting, in its potential, unactualized state, would forever remain possible.

La figuration d'un possible

Thus, Duchamp speaks of "*the figuration of a possible* (not as the opposite of impossible nor as related to probable nor as subordinated to likely); the possible is only a *physical "caustic"* (vitriol type) burning up all aesthetics or callistics."[28] *Peigne* is the "figuration" of just such a caustic (or, in Duchamp's French, "*un mordant physique*," something that bites), as is suggested by his humorous aphorism, "*Classer les peignes par le nombre de leurs dents*" (Classify combs by the number of their teeth).[29] This particular comb refers to painting as being both impossible and possible. On the one hand, it is the offspring of the "impossibility of the making," that is of choosing, in exactly the same way that the tube of paint is the offspring of the uselessness of making, once making has been replaced by choosing. On the other hand, and again exactly like the tube of paint, this comb has as a possible offspring a painting that is potential and should remain so. The analogy with the tube of paint is not gratuitous. It was brought up by the "little explanations" that Duchamp gave late in life each time he was asked to explain the genesis of the readymades; and it led to a reading of the one comb he actually chose, as an *allegorical appearance* of the tube of paint he never actualized. But the analogy should be verified, and the reading of the comb as the *figuration of a possible* (which is another name for the *allegorical appearance*) should be traced back to the tube of paint as an "explanation" of this very

28. *SS*, p. 73.

29. *SS*, p. 71.

thin potential or possibility. Some twenty years after his *rendezvous* with the comb, Duchamp once again called in the tube of paint as an example: "The possible is an infra thin. The possibility of several tubes of paint becoming a Seurat is the concrete explanation of the possible as infra thin."[30]

Apparently we are brought back to where Kandinsky had left us: to the enthusiastic experience of seeing "these strange beings . . . which one calls colors" emerge from the tube, ready "to mingle with one another and create an infinite succession of new worlds." Yet there are three differences. (1) The tubes remain sealed, and therein lies their possibility as "infra thin."[31] Only if their potential to become painting is never actualized do they retain it. (2) If the tubes were to be opened, they would not yield an "infinite succession of new worlds," they would "become a Seurat." They do not enthusiastically announce the birth of a universal language whose name would be *Malerei;* they point to a singular example of painting signified by a proper noun. (3) This example belongs to the past, not to the future. It has already happened, yet it is presented as not happening yet. Seurat's tubes were opened long ago and the painter himself, who died young, disappeared before his potential could reach full bloom. Yet he is here fictionalized as a would-be painter. His paintings are presented as if they were not yet even begun, kept prisoner in "several tubes of paint," which have not yet inseminated a single canvas. The infra-thin possibility that these tubes of paint—or the *Comb,* or all the readymades—retain is not that of painting again. It is not offered to the painter, only to the historian. It is no more than an invitation to look back. As in a parody of Kandinsky's *Rückblicke,* the

30. Duchamp, *Notes,* note 1. The note is undated, but it is probably from the late thirties. The oldest dated text relative to the infra thin is note 35, dated July 29, 1937.

31. "Infra thin" is not a noun but an adjective, says Duchamp (*Notes,* note 5), although the *sign of the accordance* might be the perfect exemplifcation of the infra thin made into a noun. Even as an adjective, "infra-thin" never qualifies a thing or an experience, but rather the difference between two things or experiences. This difference is at its thinnest when those two things are the same.

history of modern painting is melancholically looked at in hindsight as if it still had its future, while its achievements already belong to the past.

Now the question raised by this "explanation" is, why Seurat? Why not "the possibility of several tubes of paint becoming a Duchamp," for example, or "becoming a painting" in general? Why is this particular name recalled for the potential it entails? Isn't it an invitation handed over to us, the posthumous readers of Duchamp's note and the posthumous spectators of Seurat, to reinvestigate the history of modern painting as if it still had its future? Doesn't it suggest that although modernism might be over, it still retains a potential future in the form of a postmodern rereading of modernism? Inasmuch as hindsight forces us to recognize that the "program" of modernism was accomplished in the very brief time span that separates Seurat from Malevich's *Black Square*, doesn't Duchamp's note invite us to reinterpret this "program," not through the grid of its own regulative ideas—pure visibility, pure color, pure painting—but through Duchamp's idea of *pictorial nominalism*, as it takes the modernist regulative ideas as its referent? Doesn't it compel us to take a second look at the feeling of impossibility that has propelled the history of modernism and to relocate that feeling in the objective conditions that have made painting useless? Why not start, then, by relocating Duchamp's feelings for Seurat in those objective conditions? We would see that Seurat's relation to the tube of paint is also Duchamp's link to Seurat. "The greatest scientific spirit of the nineteenth century, greater in that sense than Cézanne is Seurat, who died at the age of thirty-two."[32] Subjectively speaking, the link between Duchamp and Seurat, their common feeling, is their equal contempt for the hand, *la patte*. As early as 1886, Félix Fénéon commented to that effect upon Seurat's *Un dimanche après-midi à la Grande Jatte* (A Sunday Afternoon on the Grande Jatte, 1886): "Here indeed is *la patte* useless and trick effects impossible; there is no place for bravado; let the

32. Marcel Duchamp, "A Complete Reversal of Art Opinions by Marcel Duchamp, Iconoclast," *Arts and Decoration*, September 1915; reprinted in *Studio International* 189, no. 973 (1975): 29.

hand be clumsy but let the eye be nimble, perspicacious and well learned."[33] What Duchamp admired in Seurat was the "scientific spirit" who abandoned "the devilish convenience of the brush" (as Delacroix already said) and mechanized it within the codes of divisionism. It was this abandonment of handicraft that Duchamp amplified to the point where he abandoned painting itself:

> From Munich on, I had the idea of the Large Glass. I was finished with cubism. . . . The whole trend of painting was something I didn't care to continue. . . . There was no essential satisfaction for me in painting ever. And then of course I just wanted to react against what the others were doing, Matisse and all the rest, all that work of the hand. In French there is an old expression, *la patte*, meaning the artist's touch, his personal style, his "paw." I wanted to get away from *la patte* and from all that retinal painting.[34]

Duchamp's admiration for a painter as "retinal" as Seurat is rooted in their common indictment of *la patte*, and this in turn offers the possibility of a new reading of early modernism, which, far from taking the positivistic naturalism of neoimpressionism at face value, relates it to one of its most important technological conditions, the tube of paint.

The Divisionist Division of Labor

Although tin or copper tubes were already in use in England at the end of the eighteenth century for the preservation of watercolor, it was only around 1830–1840 that tubes of oil paints began to be available on the market. The American painter-turned-paint-manufacturer John Rand is believed to have

33. Félix Fénéon, "*Les Impressionnistes en 1886*," in *Au-delà de l'impressionnisme* (Paris: Hermann, 1966), p. 66; my translation.

34. Quoted in Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, p. 24.

been the first to produce oil paints in tin tubes on an industrial scale. The impact of this simple technological innovation upon the future of painting is considerable, and it would be wrong to read it as mere practical progress and to believe that it simply liberated painters from a slavery external to their art. Together with the invention of photography—with which it is contemporaneous—the spreading of the tube of paint represents one of the two specific points of industrialization's penetration into the painters' practice. Like photography, it was thus threatening painters most directly in their artisanal tradition: certainly the tube of paint freed them from a tedious and mechanical task, but it also introduced division of labor into a professional activity that had always sought to maintain as much control as possible over the whole production process. What is called modernism in painting, and which began then, is perhaps nothing but the history of the obstinate—and to this day, continued—resistance that painters opposed to the division of labor with which industrialization was threatening them. Competition with photography was the most obvious threat; competition with the pigment industry was a more insidious but no less crucial one and, by the way, linked to the first. Historians usually agree to date the beginnings of modernist painting from the moment landscape painters abandoned the artifices of workshop practice to seek daylight. In submitting their skill to the constraints of on-site production, of course, the *plein-air* painters entered into explicit competition with photography. The camera was the principle mechanizing device that the painters had to reclaim, which they did by mimicking it and behaving as if their eye and their hand, coupled to their canvas, constituted a light-recording machine. They sought to give their craft a reprieve by "internalizing" the technology threatening it and by "mechanizing" their own body at work. Whereas this strategy of resistance was still implicit in impressionism ("Monet is but an eye," said Cézanne), it was made explicit by Seurat's divisionism, which was simultaneous and parallel to the invention of "autochrome" color photography by the Lumière brothers. Since Van Eyck, color and light had been one and the same thing for the true painter. With impressionism, they began to split: the instantaneous imprint of light is what Monet tried to capture in his *Rouen Cathedrals* or his *Haystacks*. Color, on the

other hand, became the means to an end. And it could do so because, being readily available in tubes, it had become a commodity whose supply was abundant and devoid of mystique. As long as painters had to grind and mix their pigments themselves, *plein-airism* was a technical impossibility. For Constable or the Barbizon painters to leave their studio and paint outside, directly from nature, the availability of ready-made oil paints in easy-to-carry containers was a prerequisite. One cannot imagine them carrying along the bulky equipment that the preparation of paint on the premises would involve. Out of *plein-airism*, the palette of the impressionists developed as an aesthetic doctrine already reflecting upon this new state of things. It was limited to the colors of the prism, and thus it excluded black. Although the justification for this exclusion was naturalism—there is no black in nature—what the doctrine really did was to organize the act of painting as a series of choices within a standardized logic of colors. The divisionist (or, loosely called, pointillist) technique first developed by Seurat rationalized this production even further, explicitly turning the hand of the painter into a clumsy machine that operated in steps and rejected the blending continuity of handicraft.

As it did in regard to photography, divisionism resisted the threat wrought by the tube of paint in mimicking it. Since division of labor had already entered the painter's trade, painters now being consumers of the pigment industry, it became a matter of accepting this and of shifting the division of labor further down the production process, so to speak, while transposing it on the aesthetic level where it would be meaningful (and where divisionism, in the double sense of the word, would truly deserve its name). The deliberate "industrialization" of the painter's hand resulted in a displaced division of labor, which was no longer simply technical but rather aesthetic, and which the divisionist doctrine recognized and promoted: not only was the hand severed from the eye, but also the maker from the author, with, as a result, an altogether new solidarity between author and spectator. In classical aesthetics the function of authorship was a combination of skill and culture: form and content meshed into one another through artisanal craftsmanship. The author was the maker. The spectator's function was to be in a state of passive receptivity—that state which

classical aesthetics called disinterestedness or contemplation—and to exert taste, to evaluate the degree of excellence in skill and culture displayed by the maker.[35] Divisionism set up a new aesthetic division of labor: authorship now included spectatorship and excluded, as far as possible, the simple mechanical task of making. The maker (the hand) remained passive inasmuch as it simply obeyed, "clumsily" and automatically, the commands of the eye already encoded in the ready-made discriminations provided by the paint manufacturers' color charts. The spectator, on the other hand, was asked to blend the pointillist encoding of the colored image on his or her retina, and became an active partner to the artist (who is of course also the first spectator of the work). Aesthetic reception was no longer contemplative and could no longer be disinterested. Even taste, as innate faculty or acquired culture, didn't matter as much as the injunction to synthesize the image on the retina and, through a reflexive movement of the mind, "nimble, perspicacious and well learned," to constitute its phenomenological status. Despite the positivistic intent of divisionism, this is not to say that there was no room left for aesthetic judgment. But the aesthetic judgment was not exclusively a judgment of taste anymore, and it no longer merely appreciated how the author/maker succeeded in meshing skill and culture. It became, so to speak, a second-degree judgment, the reflexive movement of the mind that took the beholder's retinal task as a springboard and produced a phenomenological object that, in itself, was not retinal at all, but rather the mental outcome of a critical choice. Is this what Duchamp had in mind when he said, in conversation with Alain Jouffroy, "I believe there is a difference between a kind of painting that primarily addresses itself only to the retina, to the retinal impression, and a painting that goes beyond the retina and uses the tube of paint as a springboard to something further"?[36] Perhaps not quite. For he added:

35. Disinterestedness and contemplation are essential to any aesthetics of taste. To arrive at a critique of aesthetic judgment that is not necessarily an aesthetics of taste, but that allows for it as a particular case, is a central concern of this book. See chapters 1, 4, and 5, in particular.

36. Alain Jouffroy, *Une révolution du regard* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 115; translation by Rosalind Krauss.

"This is the case of religious artists of the Renaissance. The tube of paint didn't interest them." The context of the conversation was one of those frequent occasions when Duchamp would pit "gray matter" against "retinal painting," a theme, by now a cliché of Duchamp scholarship, that has lingered too long and has allowed too many art critics who systematically oppose painting, or modernist painting, to cover themselves with Duchamp's authority in order to proclaim that painting as a whole is definitively obsolete (that's the "leftist" version), or that modernist or abstract painting is doomed and should revert to literary values (that's the conservative version: Jean Clair's defense of *peinture lettrée* is typical). But in his conversation with Jouffroy as in many others, Duchamp took great care to dissociate himself from literary painting—surrealism discreetly included. So that when he mocked what he called the "physical preoccupations" of "impressionism, fauvism, cubism, abstraction," it is the exceptions that deserve attention: "Some men like Seurat or like Mondrian were not retinalists, even in wholly seeming to be so."[37]

So, when Duchamp said, "It's the viewers who make the pictures," he took stock of the redistribution of the traditional division of labor within aesthetics accomplished by divisionism. When he equated art with making and making with choosing, he gave this redistribution ethical value, conferring on the viewer a share in the responsibilities of aesthetic choice. When he mentioned "a tube of blue, a tube of red" as an example of making (that is, of choosing) and systematically offered the tube of paint as an "explanation" of the readymade, he referred the readymade to those technological conditions that were already underlying *plein-airism* and which divisionism acknowledged. When he identified genius with the impossibility of making (that is, of choosing, that is, of painting), he granted the viewers their share of genius, provided they would refer their aesthetic choices to the abandonment of an attitude of pure contemplation, in the way the divisionist painters referred theirs to the abandonment of craftsmanship. And finally, when he found precisely in this abandonment the

37. Ibid., p. 111.

"possibility of several tubes of paint becoming a Seurat," what did he do if not hand over to us, viewers of Seurat as well as of Duchamp, the responsibility of reinterpreting, in the face of the readymade, that portion of the history of modern painting that goes from *plein-airism* to divisionism, so as to posit the historical and aesthetic importance of Seurat in the technological conditions that had made the practice of painting objectively useless, subjectively impossible, yet possible nevertheless?

The readymade's potential to allow a rereading of modern painting as if it still had its future does not stop with Seurat and divisionism. It extends into the very context in which it appeared in 1913, the birth of abstract painting. The tube of paint was Duchamp's ironic response to what was *the* question at issue in the genesis of abstract painting, the question of pure color. The concern with pure color is, in fact, a century or so older than abstract painting itself, and has its roots in two different and very opposed traditions. The first, which is psychological and symbolist, starts with Goethe's *Farbenlehre*, published in 1810, and makes its way in the history of nineteenth-century painting and painting theories, mostly German and Central European, through Runge, Friedrich, and the Nazarenes, the German romantic aesthetics of the sublime, subsequent *Farbenlehren* such as Bezold's, and the announcement of an abstract ornamental art in Viennese Sezession circles at the turn of the century (Karl Scheffler, Arthur Roessler, Adolf Hoelzel). It eventually leads to Kandinsky's theorization of pure color as an elementary signifier of pure painting. Kupka's own passage to abstraction equally owes much to this tradition, although it is also, and very significantly, indebted to the second tradition of pure color, which is essentially French and has its origins in Chevreul's researches on simultaneous contrast.[38] First published in 1839 and republished in 1889, Chevreul's memoir, which is a complete, scientific and systematic theory of color, had already inspired Delacroix when, in a climate of both symbolism and positivism, it became the

38. Eugène Chevreul, *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs et de l'assortiment des objets colorés considéré d'après cette loi* (Paris: Pitois-Levrault, 1839).

theoretical grounding for divisionism. The new doctrine was laid down in writing by Signac, who soon became the leader of the neoimpressionist movement, even before Seurat's death, in 1891. He defined the "basic principles of neoimpressionism" in terms of works "painted only with pure hues, separated, balanced and optically mixed according to a rational method," adding what historically speaking is perhaps the first definition of purism in painting: "Like the impressionists the neoimpressionists find on their palette nothing but pure colors. But they absolutely forbid themselves all mixing on the palette. . . . Each brushstroke is taken pure from the palette and remains pure on canvas."[39]

Toward the end of the century, Signac's theoretical justification of an art "guided by tradition and science" was no longer believed in. The symbolist interest in irrationality had outgrown the positivistic confidence in scientific rules, and the objective naturalism inherent in impressionism gave way to the subjective concerns of expressionism. Yet there is a formal continuity between the practice of Signac, Luce, Cross, or Van Rysselberghe and that of early fauvism. Between 1904 and 1906, Matisse, Marquet, Manguin, Vlaminck, and Derain were all painting in a loosely pointillist manner, decorative and devoid of theoretical claims.[40] Moreover, many of the artists who would a little later

39. Paul Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au Néo-impressionnisme* (1899; reprint, Paris: Hermann, 1964), pp. 89, 91; my translation.

40. Of course, especially in the case of such a great painter as Matisse, things are more complex. Following Catherine Bock (*Henri Matisse and Neo-impressionism, 1898–1908* [Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research, 1981]), but differing in interpretation, Yve-Alain Bois reminds us that Matisse went through two divisionist phases, one in 1898, in which "he is completely engrossed in trying to put Signac's principles in practice," and one in 1904, culminating in *Luxe, calme et volupté*, in which he in fact prepares his complete break with divisionism demonstrated by *La joie de vivre* (1905–1906). Signac's rage when he saw this last painting at the Salon des Indépendants led him to write to Charles Angrand that it "evokes the multicolored shopfronts of the merchants of paints, varnishes and household goods" (Yve-Alain Bois, "Matisse and 'Arche-drawing,'" in *Painting as Model* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990], p. 18.) An interesting accusation, in the context of a discussion of the tube of paint, and one that makes

become the cubists had a corresponding pointillist period at the same time: Braque, Derain, Delaunay, Metzinger, even Mondrian in his "luminist" vein. Indeed cubism, especially the dogmatic cubism of the Puteaux group, was a reaction against the superficial decorativeness of fauvism and neoimpressionism and an attempt to provide painting with a new set of theoretical tasks. Partly thanks to new reception conditions that had put Cézanne's reputation far above Seurat's, the issue of pure color was momentarily abandoned and even repressed. Hence the general dullness of palette in cubist painting. But it emerged again, toward 1911–1912, in the practice of Mondrian, Kupka, and especially Delaunay, coinciding with the advent of abstract painting. It involved a new reading or a new reception of Chevreul's theories, made possible by a new intellectual context—the combination of symbolism and positivism had given way to that of simultanism and structuralism.

In poetry, the interest in simultaneity, indeed the passion for it, as evolved by Apollinaire, Cendrars, and Barzun, was itself a late offspring of symbolism. In painting, it developed as an aspect of the ongoing speculation on the fourth

me wonder whether the "quantity-as-quality-equation"—"One square centimeter of any blue is not as blue as a square meter of the same blue," which Bois convincingly posits at the root of what he calls "the Matisse system" and its break with "the Signac system"—does not represent another regulative idea, distinguished both from the "pure-color-as-language-idea" promoted by the early abstractionists and from Duchamp's *pictorial nominalism*, an idea moreover a lot less idealist than the former and a lot more compatible with the latter. This is a major issue for any historical rereading of modern art. It perhaps allows one to escape the forced choice between the Duchamp-lineage and the "modernist painting"–lineage à la Greenberg. It is difficult to make room for a Matisse-lineage that would not take the road of abstract, modernist painting (Kelly being the major figure), yet, if you think of Warhol's enigmatic statement, "I want to be Matisse," in connection to what he actually did with drawing, color, and "cutting in color," you begin to think that the figurative Matisse has had at least one magnificent, and very unforeseen, heir, one who was definitely a *painter* in the guise of an *artist*. And of course, the road from the ready-made tube of paint to both the *Brillo Boxes* and the "paint by number" canvases is straight.

dimension among the cubists and on speed among the futurists. It was left to Delaunay to bring this rather loose concern together with Chevreul's theory of simultaneous contrast, and to produce in his work and in his writings a new doctrine of painting, which he called simultanism. The issue of pure color no longer worked in the service of an aesthetics of imitation (as it did for Chevreul himself and to a large extent for the neoimpressionists); it was fully translated into a new aesthetics borrowed from poetry and whose outcome was, in Delaunay's words, "the ABC of expressive methods that derive from the physical elements of color creating new form."[41] Here again, in Delaunay's reference to the "physical elements of color," we encounter the profound paradox at the root of the impulse toward abstraction: in the depth of matter lies a language. Delaunay's writings actually provide us with the most elaborate rationalization for the switch to abstract painting. While the elements he posits as a groundwork for abstraction may be "physical," like atoms, they are also and above all linguistic or semiotic: "the ABC of expressive methods." Chevreul's system was no longer read as an application of physics to the realm of perception psychology (a typically positivistic bias), but as the establishment of a linguistic system through which color could "speak" without reference to the representation of nature. Numerous parallels, starting with the prevalence given by both to synchronicity over diachronicity, can be drawn between Chevreul's theory of colors and the new, structuralist theory of language developed by Ferdinand de Saussure in precisely those years preceding the birth of abstract painting. Of course, none of the pioneers of abstraction had read Saussure at the time, and structuralism became an "ism" only fifty years later, when the work of Saussure became the grid for various reading strategies applicable to virtually every "signifying practice," painting included.[42] But what in the sixties became a matter

41. Arthur A. Cohen, ed., *The New Art of Color: The Writings of Robert and Sonia Delaunay* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), p. 16.

42. The starting signal for this might be seen in Roland Barthes's "reversal" of Saussure, when, in *Elements de sémiologie* (1964), he suggested that semiology should be seen as being part of linguistics rather than linguistics as being part of semiology.

of deconstruction was first a matter of construction. What was at stake around 1913 was not the analysis, or the ideological critique, of the "pictorial language," it was its synthesis, the ideological legitimation of abstract painting justified as a language.

Both Delaunay and Kupka openly acknowledged Chevreul and Seurat as their sources. Duchamp, as we know, also acknowledged the importance of Seurat (and thus indirectly of Chevreul). The same interview where he rails against *la patte* ends with this conclusion: "The only man of the past whom I really respected was Seurat, who made his big paintings like a carpenter, like an artisan. He didn't let his hand interfere with his mind. Anyway, from 1912 on, I decided to stop being a painter in the professional sense."[43] To become, I suppose, a painter in the *nominalist* sense, since all around Duchamp in 1912, what was unconsciously at stake for all those painters who sought to establish the "ABC" of an "international language which will endure forever" was that its name would not be Esperanto but *Malerei*. Well, for Duchamp *Malerei* spells out *Peigne:* the infra-thin slip of the tongue that hides the potential "I ought to paint" in the name of a ready-made object which it is impossible to call a painting.

Le célibataire broie son chocolat lui-même

The feeling of painting's impossibility must have been the subjective signal accompanying the awareness of its objective uselessness, that is, of the painter's idleness in an industrial culture. With industrialization, the painter was replaced by the machine. The camera, of course, come readily to mind, but here again the consequences of the newly available tubes of paint should not be overlooked. The fact is that the bachelor no longer grinds his chocolate himself. Duchamp spent eight years on the *Large Glass,* meticulously transferring its elements—the *Bride* in her domain, up there, the *Bachelor Machine,* of which the *Chocolate Grinder* is the central piece, below—from sketches and preliminary works. This magnificent painting on glass—better, painting under glass—was

43. Quoted in Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors,* pp. 24–25.

the tireless labor of a craftsman, and even if the result shows no resemblance at all to the modernist painting done in the period, still, it is a painting. Duchamp could not have relinquished the painter's slow, artisanal activity without ceaselessly mourning it and recording the process. The bachelor's (i.e., the painter's) impossible desire for the Bride (i.e., painting) is not only encapsulated in the ready-made objects that infinitely postpone its fulfillment. The *Large Glass* also tells its story, and it is the story of scopophilia, of the desire to see the Bride stripped bare, of seeing painting reduced to its naked appearance of pure painting. With the same ironic twist that made him want to see eroticism transformed into an artistic "ism," Duchamp was mocking the idea of pure visibility. Redubbed *oculism,* the regulative idea of abstract painting became the object of a narrative fantasy. In retrospect, this may very well be what the history of abstract or modernist painting was. All the same, the desire to paint was still there, and Duchamp didn't fail to melancholically refer the chocolate grinder's "adage of spontaneity: the bachelor grinds his chocolate himself,"[44] to the objective uselessness of the old grinding machine: "The 'useless' of the chocolate grinder must be the brush stroke over some invisible spots that the bachelor secretly maintains."[45] With all its onanistic connotations referring to painting as "olfactory masturbation," the *Bachelor Machine* is a self-portrait in disguise, whose very personal meaning also resonates with the historical conditions that led Duchamp to officially record his abandonment of painting in the readymade, on the one hand, but also to "secretly maintain" the cherished activity of a painter-bricoleur, on the other. The *Grinder* portrays the painter jobless and useless, since the "basic elements" of his craft, the fabrication of pure color, had been taken over by industry. Painters no longer grind their own colors, they buy them in tubes. But the *Grinder* also portrays the painter as he mimics this industrial process, taking on the guise of a color-grinding machine. Duchamp, like John Rand, planned to turn himself into a paint manufacturer: "For the final colors, make up all the colors of the picture before using them and *put*

44. *The Green Box,* in *SS,* p. 68.
45. Duchamp, *Notes,* note 115.

them in tubes, with labels (for being able to correct, retouch, etc.)."[46] The project is ironic, of course, and the *Grinder* is an allegory, which is why it is the color of chocolate, brown, the most impure of all colors, that in Duchamp's allegory stands for pure color—in the singular. He calls it molecular, natural, and native, as in a pastiche of Delaunay's "physical element": "There is *one* single native chocolate color which serves to determine all chocolates."[47] And when, years later, in *Moonlight on the Bay at Basswood,* 1953, he used actual chocolate for pigment, the irony of the *Chocolate Grinder* came full circle.

The fact that painters no longer grind their own pigments may seem merely an obvious consequence of the availability of industrially processed tubes of paint. Yet this fact is crucial to an understanding of the cultural changes that disrupted the tradition of painting and that made the modern tradition a sort of anti-tradition leading to the demise of painting as craft and its instant rebirth as idea. In the old days of painting, the grinding of colors, along with the making of stretchers, the gessoing of the canvas and other preparatory practices, was not considered a subordinate activity. Cennino Cennini prescribed it as an important, almost amorous process in which the echoes of Duchamp's "olfactory masturbation" can already be heard:

> Start grinding color by color: take a porphyry slab, not too polished, half an arm long on each side. Take another porphyry stone to hold in hand, flat underneath, in the shape of a bowl, and smaller, so that the hand can grip it firmly and steer it here and there as it wishes. Pour your oil on the color and grind it for about half an hour, an hour, as long as you want, for if you ground it a whole year long the color would only become better and better.[48]

46. Ibid., note 80.

47. *SS,* p. 85.

48. Cennino Cennini, *Il libro dell'arte,* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1932), 1:21. (Written *ca.* 1400.) See also Xavier de Langlais, *La technique de la peinture à l'huile* (Paris: Flammarion, 1959), pp. 332–333.

Despite the increasing intellectualization of painting from the Renaissance on, the humble, mechanical task of grinding colors remained an important part of the painter's know-how, endowed with alchemical prestige, and jealously protected as a secret knowledge. Moreover, in the days when young painters still had to learn their skill in apprenticeship to a master, the transmission of the workshop recipes played a considerable role in keeping the continuity of tradition. It was a symbolic gesture, a sort of passport to autonomous professional life that the master handed over to the apprentice only when he judged him worthy of it. As academic training began to replace workshop apprenticeship, of course the grinding of colors lost some of its secrets, and the passing on of the grinding recipes some of its symbolic value. By the time of the industrial revolution, it had long ceased to be a privileged procedure in the transmission of tradition. But interestingly enough, the more it lost its real importance, the more it was idealized by those traditional artists who, witnessing the industrial revolution, were afraid for art's survival, and whose only answer to the new challenge was to seek to revive the golden age of guilds and corporations. From Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites down to the foundation of the Bauhaus, and all the way through the Arts and Crafts movement and the evolution of the *Kunstgewerbeschulen* in Germany, the same nostalgia for handicraft can be felt, accompanied, as far as painting is concerned, with a fixation on the most manual aspects of the trade. In most cases, the concern for painting technique went hand-in-hand with a frightened refusal of industrialism and a more or less avowed hatred of modernism. In most cases also, this refusal and this hatred focused on a certain fetishization of the grinding of colors, proportionate to the importance it once had in the transmission of tradition. It is therefore not surprising that as late as 1921, almost a century after the invention of the tube of paint, such a leading authority on painting technique as Max Doerner, in his book *Malmaterial und seine Verwendung im Bilde,* would start his chapter on oil paint with this sentence: "It is recommended that the painter grind his own colors."[49]

49. Max Doerner, *The Materials of the Artist* (London: Granada Publishing, 1977), p. 143 (a translation of *Malmaterial und seine Verwendung im Bilde,* 1921). Doerner was a very academic

Absurd and pathetic as it sounds in retrospect, Doerner's admonition to painters to grind their own colors is highly symptomatic, and quite understandable from the academic standpoint that he maintained. His book is not a neutral treatise on technique, it is a surreptitious sermon against modernism:

> The painter of today must become more conscious of his responsibility for the permanency of his work than is unfortunately the case. Many a painter of today lives to see his own handiwork go to pieces in his lifetime because he abused his materials. Before one can become a master, one must first have been a disciple. Those who do not believe this will pay the penalty sooner or later. There is no shortcut to becoming a good painter, to quote Reynolds.[50]

What is at stake is duration, tradition, and continuity. No makeshifts, no shortcuts should be allowed in discipline and apprenticeship. Even relying on ready-made pigments is not innocent and would lead painters to abuse their materials. When one considers the general contempt among modernist painters for *la patte*, durability, and other overvaluations of sheer technique in the light of Doerner's reactionary defense of tradition, one comes to think that this contempt was neither accessory to their stylistic innovations nor simply and deliberately provocative. It is not as if Mondrian and Malevich, whose work, technically speaking, indeed didn't pass the test of time too well, had no other

but prominent character on the Munich art scene while Duchamp was there. He was *Dozent* at the Royal Bavarian Academy and chairman of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft zur Förderung rationeller Malverfahren*, a society that had been founded in 1884 in order to mediate between the paint manufacturers and the painters. A few weeks after Duchamp's departure from Munich, Doerner, who thought of himself, so to speak, as the Ralph Nader of the painters, began giving a series of public lectures on painting technique. One wonders whom these lectures could actually have reached. Obviously, Doerner was pursuing the dream of rallying the scattered community of painters back to tradition.

50. Ibid., p. 316.

claim but the destruction of the painting tradition as it hitherto existed and didn't seek to transmit their own work to future generations. Quite the contrary. But what they felt had to be passed on was much less an object than an attitude, a sensitivity, an ideal. Someone else could redo their paintings if they fell to pieces, or better still, make new ones, working from the example they had set. What they actually understood and worked for, and what Doerner stubbornly refused to acknowledge, was that the mode of transmission of culture that constitutes a tradition had been radically changed. The time is long gone when artistic culture and know-how were transmitted from one painter to the next in the private space of the workshop, and the apprenticeship contract that bound together two generations of painters is a thing of the past. There have been many attempts during the nineteenth century and since to reconstitute, often in esoteric and always in nostalgic forms, craftsmen's and painters' guilds modeled after the corporations of the Middle Ages, but none of them succeeded. The Academy itself could no longer control access to the profession of painter, which is why its teaching, ever on the defensive, degenerated into academicism. Reynolds was the last great pedagogue-academician and David, the revolutionary painter, did not succeed in being one: the Revolution had put an end to the monopolistic claims of the Academy, which in any case had been threatened since its very inception by the rise of another competitive and public institution, the Salon.[51] Modernity starts with Salon painting, and this means that a modern painting is addressed to the layman even before it is conceived, because it is destined to land in the marketplace from its outset. The avant-garde was born out of the controversies around Salon painting, and the core of the phenomenon of the avant-garde is that from then on, painters had joined the crowd, laymen among laymen, partly because their means of production, tubes of paint among them, were in the marketplace already, available to anyone.

51. See Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).

No padlock restricts access to the profession of modern painter. The politics of the Salons, the very inadequate conversion of the Academy into Ecoles des Beaux-Arts, the economics of the marketplace—all these phenomena that evolved under the impulse of the general process of industrialization—conspired to fuse art's conditions of production with its conditions of reception. With the Salons, anyone, even deprived of taste and culture, was granted the right to judge painting, and was even invited to do so. With the decline of academic art into academicism anyone, even uncultivated and "primitive," could claim the title of pioneer, in spite of the Beaux-Arts. With the market as sole regulator of practice and arbiter of taste, anyone, even untalented and unskilled, could try painting. Like the adolescent Kandinsky, all they needed to do was buy a box of oil paints and try their luck. The story that Kandinsky remembers with so much lyricism in *Rückblicke* is emblematic on more than one count. The gist of the modern utopia is to have enthusiastically embraced the conditions set forth, if only symbolically, by the tube of paint. Out of it sprang pure color, but in Kandinsky's fantasy pure color meant pure painting already: a brand-new form of painting, without past, without apprenticeship, without tradition. Plebiscite would replace the masters as soon as humankind would speak the same universal language. It would not be called Esperanto but painting. With this act of faith abstraction was founded, and everything had to be done anew: new teaching methods would relinquish the models provided by the *Abmalerei* of the past and rest, instead, on "the language of forms and colors"; a new regulation of artistic supply and demand would correct mercantilism and restore art's use value; a jurisdiction of taste more democratic even than the Salons, and legitimated by the people, would set in. Kandinsky spared no effort to make this utopia, which was pedagogical throughout, into a reality. He would teach at the Bauhaus and write the "grammar of forms" he had already projected in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, which he entitled *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche* (From Point to Line to Surface). Itten and later Albers would do the same for the language of colors. Klee would look to nature and its organic laws to find his Organon; Malevich would write a semiotic history of painting starting with Cézanne; Mondrian, El Lissistzky, Van Doesburg, all would write,

teach, broadcast their ideas as much as their art. Since the constitution and the transmission of a modern tradition were now in the hands of the public at large, the world would become a vast art school. And so painting would rise from its ashes.

Transition

This utopia failed. This pedagogy, this policy, this ideology failed, and if it were true that aesthetics is irredeemably tied to the ideals informing it, we would have to say that the art generated by the modernist utopia failed too. The Bauhaus produced very few great artists and the Bauhaus model, adopted by innumerable art schools around the world, either perpetuated a formalism of the most sterile kind or entered a deep crisis. The world does not speak the Esperanto of abstract art; the public at large has not learned to regulate its aesthetic judgments through the idea of pure visibility; and the professional artworld has retreated into a specialized culture analogous, but only analogous, to scientific culture, when it has not simply surrendered to the market. No new tradition has been founded on the basis of an elementary universal language made, for example, of red squares, yellow triangles, and blue circles. Instead, we have had "the tradition of the new." It has not replaced tradition in the old sense. The pessimist and conservative Max Doerner had more insight than Kandinsky when he said: "Today most artists work independently of one another, but in the days of old masters each artist was a link in a chain, a part of tradition. . . . Today every artist is expected to turn out a new hit each season in the manner of a vaudeville performer."[52]

Doerner was right: as the chain of tradition has been broken, "artists work independently of one another." When temporal filiations are cut, spatial ties become undone; when the dead don't speak to the living anymore, then the living cease to communicate with each other. Once the community of peers with whom artists speak across time has dissolved, there remain only social

52. Doerner, *Materials of the Artist*, p. 315.

values on which to shape their ambitions. When there is no authority to distinguish between artist and non-artist, then the very definition of art becomes a public matter settled by the vox populi, with the obvious risks of yielding to fashion and demagogy. Doerner saw this, but what he refused to admit was that this condition of the painter of modern life, which Baudelaire had grasped with so much more clear-sightedness, was irreversible. No corporatism, no defense of craftsmanship, no admonition telling the bachelors to grind their own chocolate, would make them cease to be bachelors. If Duchamp and his readymade prove Kandinsky wrong, and empty the tube of paint of its promises, they do not prove Doerner right; they explain him. They reopen the file on pure painting; they investigate the archaeology of pure color; they provide the historian, or the "archaeologist," with a thread to be followed backwards, from Kandinsky's tube, from Kupkas "planes by color," from Delaunay's simultaneous *Windows,* to Seurat's divisionism where, for the first time, a new aesthetics, inherent in his canvases, took stock of a new division of labor attributing execution to the bachelor machine and authorship, together with spectatorship, to the alienated crowd in the midst of which artists and non-artists alike work "independently of one another."

It is around Seurat and Signac that the Société des Artistes Indépendants, whose motto was "Ni récompense ni jury," was founded in 1884. It is the Indépendants who gave divisionism a home, who propagated the theories of Chevreul, Ogden Rood, and Charles Blanc, who showed Dubois-Pillet, Angrand, Luce, Cross, and also Pissarro in his divisionist period. It is the Indépendants who stood for anything progressive in French art in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Signac, who saw himself as invested with Seurat's legacy and who, like Seurat himself and like Pissarro, had sympathy for the anarchists, had sketched a program that would not be disclaimed by any of the subsequent pedagogical enterprises, such as the Bauhaus, which counted on the education of the eye to free modern painters from their alienation and given them the broadest social basis: "When the eye is educated, the people will see more than subject matter in paintings. When the society we dream of exists, when the workers, rid of the exploiters who drive them stupid with work, have the time

to think and to learn, they will appreciate the manifold qualities of works of art."[53] Here, better than anywhere else, the foundation of the Société des Artistes Indépendants reveals its social dream, and the theme of pure color reveals its fundamental utopianism. The fact that artists work "independently of one another" was a premise to the Société's foundation but by no means its last word: when the workers' eye would be educated, artists would have reintegrated their community; but it would no longer be the community of their peers, it would be the whole of society. To educate the workers' eye does not mean turning them into bourgeois connoisseurs; it means teaching them to do consciously what they already do spontaneously: discriminate colors and recompose them optically. Perhaps it is the utopian socialism underlying modernism that explains why it settled for pure color even more than for "basic form," when it purported to lay the grounds for a universal access to art. The combat of drawing and color is a very old one, and even at the time of the quarrel between the "Rubénistes" and the "Poussinistes," the conservatives were on the side of drawing and the progressives on that of color. Le Brun, who played such an important role in the creation of Colbert's Academy and would become its first director, seemed to be echoing Max Doerner in advance when he said, in 1672: "The grinders would be ranking with the painters if drawing didn't make the difference."[54] A century later, Diderot apparently agreed, only to play unwittingly into Signac's hands: "Only masters of art are good judges of drawing; anybody can judge color."[55]

Signac's utopia translates as follows: when pure color is legitimated as the true foundation for painting, then anyone will be a judge of painting as well. In this lies the Indépendants' legacy to the founders of abstract painting. Meanwhile, however, the Indépendants didn't live up to their utopian ideal. They

53. P. Signac, quoted in Germain Bazin, *L'univers impressionniste* (Paris: Somogy, 1981), pp. 152–153. (My translation.)
54. Quoted in André Richard, *La critique d'art* (Paris: P.U.F., 1968), p. 23. (My translation.)
55. Denis Diderot, *Traité du Beau* (Verviers: Marabout, 1973), p. 69. (My translation.)

hosted the progressive academization of divisionism and allowed the doctrine to freeze, until it became no more than a pretext for decorative pointillism. It is at the Indépendants that the grand pedagogical utopia of modernism first failed and that pure color was betrayed. Do I need to insist on the reasons for the myth's failure? It suffers from a contradiction that has accompanied the whole of modernity: on the one hand, only "when the society we dream of exists" will the new division of labor promoted by divisionism cease to alienate professional painters from the people. On the other hand, only "when the eye is educated" will the people erase the differences setting them apart from the professionals. Art was given the task of reforming society. Needless to say, it failed. In twenty years, the Indépendants lost their illusions: Pissarro abandoned divisionism grumbling at ideological painting, Signac and Luce took refuge in Saint-Tropez. They began dreaming of Arcadia once again, and the time when Seurat had the social classes rubbing shoulders on the banks of the Seine was long gone. Signac was named president of the Société in 1908, after the fauvist explosion, as if the authority of an old-timer had been required to properly welcome the young blood and to warrant the continuity, which is formally evident but which is merely formal, between *La Grande Jatte* and *La Joie de Vivre*. The fireworks would soon die out. The discovery of Cézanne overshadowed Seurat. Cubism repressed color, and when the Indépendants reluctantly made room for cubism, in 1911, it was for the orthodox cubism of Gleizes and Metzinger. Braque and Picasso refused to participate. By 1912, the Indépendants were an academy and had rejected Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*.

Five years later, at the New York Independents, Duchamp put his abandonment of painting on the record. *Fountain* spoke of art, or prompted people to speak of art in connection with it. We have passed from the specific to the generic, and this passage is a switch of names. Exit the painter, enter the artist, the artist in general. His name was Richard Mutt, that is, anybody, since anybody could be an artist at the Independents, even a manufacturer of bathroom fixtures whose corporate name was The J. L. Mott Iron Works. That is the height of *ironism:* Mutt's piece of porcelain came out of the workshop of a manufacturer dealing in iron, the substance of *Witz* and genius, the substance

of the previous year's *Comb*. This comb would return in 1937 in the shape of a photographic reproduction adorning the cover of the magazine *Transition,* designed by Duchamp. The layout is extremely subtle: at first sight, the comb seems to float in space, seen at an angle and in perspective, like some of Malevich's figures. The title is in italics and is set so as to appear to be on the same oblique plane as the comb. The background is an edge-to-edge expanse of green—the color of the *Green Box,* but also the one color Mondrian had banned from abstract painting. Under the title, a slightly undulating trace, as if executed with watercolor by a trembling hand, alters the pure monochromy of the page and hinders fixed accommodation of the eye. Once you notice it, you can no longer read the title as if it were in continuity with the comb's perspective, but you can't plunge your gaze into the expanse of green either. With superb economy of means, Duchamp has created an image that simultaneously thwarts the flatness of the support and disturbs perspectival identification, as if he had called on both the pre-modern and the modern regulative ideas, the illusion of depth and the integrity of the picture plane. This is a figurative image, not an abstract one; it is the cover of a magazine and not a painting; but "the brushing stroke over some invisible spots that the bachelor secretly maintains" at least alludes to painting, and the reflexion that inspires it no doubt refers to the ideas regulating modernism—pure painting, pure color, pure visibility—and takes them as referents. Finally, it is a very conscious quotation of the key work in which the artist recorded his abandonment of painting, and this quotation is in turn recorded by the title: *Transition*. As if by "commissioned symmetry," it thus refers to the *Passage from Virgin to Bride* where it all started, and it sheds retrospective light on the context out of which the readymades were born: on the passage to abstraction by a whole generation of painters who rediscovered Seurat's pure colors as they moved out of cubism. Duchamp's response to their passage from figuration to abstraction would be his transition from painting to art in general.

Are we done with "the possibility of several tubes of paint becoming a Seurat"? Yes, if we simply mean that Seurat is dead. But if we think—as the reception history of the readymade proves it was thought all too often—that in

abandoning painting for readymades Duchamp assassinated painting, we would be misinterpreting the facts and perpetuating an injustice. We should not forget that, although the stroke of genius in the readymade, its *Witz*, rested in "the impossibility of the making," this was no more than a feeling, a quasi-moral feeling already at work in Seurat's painting, whose "concrete explanation" is "the possible as infra thin." It is not with promises that Seurat's tubes were filled: the progressive academization of divisionism into merely decorative pointillism has shown the failure of the modern utopia that had linked together the existence of industrially produced tubes of paint, a scientific theory of pure color, a new aesthetic division of labor, and the promise of a society that the eye's education would free from alienation. But in another sense, Seurat's tubes were not empty of promises; his paintings fulfilled them. The tube of paint—this readymade that Duchamp maintained in the *possible* state—allows a rewriting of that history which goes from Seurat to the fauvists and from the fauvists to abstraction, as it happened, but freed both from the utopia and from its failure. It lifts a mortgage that has weighed all too heavily on the way art history is written, when works are kept as hostages of ideologies whose failure is blatant. It rehabilitates the only judgment that counts, the aesthetic judgment that makes us rank *La Grande Jatte* and *La Joie de Vivre* side by side among the masterpieces of modern painting, and thus, of painting *tout court*.

There remains only one question: can we rank Duchamp's urinal, or his comb, alongside both *La Grande Jatte* and *La Joie de Vivre* as a masterpiece of art *tout court*? Perhaps not. But do we need to? Duchamp has done the "algebraic comparison" for us. We can put the comb in the rubric *art* and Matisse's canvas in the rubric *painting* and keep the rubrics separate. With the tube of paint providing us with the missing link, we are equipped to evaluate art in general on its own merits. Pure visibility will not help, that's for sure. But then it will not help us evaluate Rodchenko's red, yellow, and blue triptych either. Anyone can judge color. That doesn't prove one judges well.