

## LOOKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

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In preparing a speech on the subject of “looking outside the box”, it seemed important to ask - *why* do you look outside the box? Presumably, I thought, because you want to find something new. So, I decided this should be a short speech about *creativity*, imagination or originality. Probably about ART. No small topic, clearly I would need some help. I searched for weeks for a starting point and got stressed out. I prayed to the gods of random internet intervention, until finally, whilst distracting myself reading the “brain pickings” website ([www.brainpickings.org](http://www.brainpickings.org)), I found my starting point...

In the recording I’m about to play, Marcel Duchamp reads his short paper entitled ***The Creative Act***. Who better to explain where new ideas come from? Seven minutes from a certified genius has got to be a good start..

<http://soundcloud.com/brainpicker/marcel-duchamp-the-creative-act>

“Let us consider two important factors, the two poles of the creation of art: the artist on the one hand, and on the other the spectator who later becomes the posterity.

To all appearances, the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing.

If we give the attributes of a medium to the artist, we must then deny him the state of consciousness on the esthetic plane about what he is doing or why he is doing it. All his decisions in the artistic execution of the work rest with pure intuition and cannot be translated into a self-analysis, spoken or written, or even thought out.

T.S. Eliot, in his essay on [‘Tradition and Individual Talent,’](#) writes: ‘The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.’

Millions of artists create; only a few thousands are discussed or accepted by the spectator and many less again are consecrated by posterity.

In the last analysis, the artist may shout from all the rooftops that he is a genius: he will have to wait for the verdict of the spectator in order that his declarations take a social value and that, finally, posterity includes him in the primers of Artist History.

I know that this statement will not meet with the approval of many artists who refuse this mediumistic role and insist on the validity of their awareness in the creative act — yet, art history has consistently decided upon the virtues of a work of art thorough considerations completely divorced from the rationalized explanations of the artist.

If the artist, as a human being, full of the best intentions toward himself and the whole world, plays no role at all in the judgment of his own work, how can one describe the phenomenon which prompts the spectator to react critically to the work of art? In other words, how does this reaction come about?

This phenomenon is comparable to a transference from the artist to the spectator in the form of an esthetic osmosis taking place through the inert matter, such as pigment, piano or marble.

But before we go further, I want to clarify our understanding of the word 'art' — to be sure, without any attempt at a definition.

What I have in mind is that art may be bad, good or indifferent, but, whatever adjective is used, we must call it art, and bad art is still art in the same way that a bad emotion is still an emotion.

Therefore, when I refer to 'art coefficient', it will be understood that I refer not only to great art, but I am trying to describe the subjective mechanism which produces art in the raw state — *à l'état brut* — bad, good or indifferent.

In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward the realization is a series of efforts, pains, satisfaction, refusals, decisions, which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least on the esthetic plane.

The result of this struggle is a difference between the intention and its realization, a difference which the artist is not aware of.

Consequently, in the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap, representing the inability of the artist to express fully his intention, this difference between what he intended to realize and did realize, is the personal 'art coefficient' contained in the work.

In other words, the personal 'art coefficient' is like a arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.

To avoid a misunderstanding, we must remember that this 'art coefficient' is a personal expression of art *à l'état brut*, that is, still in a raw state, which must be 'refined' as pure sugar from molasses by the spectator; the digit of this coefficient has no bearing whatsoever on his verdict. The creative act takes another aspect when the spectator experiences the phenomenon of transmutation: through the change from inert matter into a work of art, an actual transubstantiation has taken place, and the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the esthetic scale.

All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and

interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives a final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists.”

The parts I want to pick up on here, are not about the spectator, alas, we don’t have time, but about the creative act and the artist. The first surprise for me in Duchamp’s speech was his assertion that the creative act is *purely* subjective and intuitive. This, from the man who (in my mind anyway) had started us all on the path towards conceptual art, towards an art world dominated by ideas and artist statements. Let me re-quote a passage:

*“All his decisions in the artistic execution of the work rest with pure intuition and cannot be translated into a self-analysis, spoken or written, or even thought out.”*

I’m sure many of you have, like me, experienced the sinking feeling that, once again, thinking is just getting in the way, blocking access to that mysterious, creative spark. But, I do have some trouble with this idea of artist as medium, it somehow suggests that you just sit and wait for the ‘flow’. I have spent plenty of time kind of “doodling” mindlessly, but nothing meaningful happens. It seems clear that this kind of “letting go” is not what Duchamp is describing, for in his chain of events the artist has an *intention* - he is working towards something, physically and intellectually, I think. Duchamp describes the struggle towards realization as a series of efforts, pains, satisfactions, refusals, and decisions. You have to WORK at this. But, he also says you *“cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least on the aesthetic plane”*. If not a paradox, it is certainly a tricky balancing act - you cannot go forward without the participation of thought, but thinking proves to be a hindrance!

But I know what he means, as I’m sure you do to. I have glimpsed creativity, the right balance between thinking and doing, but it is a fleeting state and hard to locate precisely. But Duchamp DOES go on to locate this moment, let me re-quote another section:

*“...in the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap, representing the inability of the artist to express fully his intention, this difference between what he intended to realize and did realize, is the personal ‘art coefficient’ contained in the work...”*

If I'm understanding, and interpreting correctly, he is saying that the "art-ness" of a work, that mysterious gift, the creative and unexpected part, arises in the GAP between intention and realization. The creative act is precisely '*the inability of the artist to express fully his intention*'. In other words, it comes from our FAILURE to realize the particular thing we originally had in mind. I heard another version of this a while ago when the gardener Monty Don was being interviewed on RN. He said "everything that's interesting happens despite you, not because of you".

So, it seems that creativity requires of you a kind of constant failure. And if that is going to be possible, then prior to this failure MUST come a willingness to take risks. You must deliberately set up roadblocks to stop your brain traveling the same well-worn path and arriving in the same place. You must look outside the box of your own hard-won successes, and then you must leap. The box might be many things - your discipline, your knowledge, your skills, your expectations, your own assessment of the work, or what you think other people will think. Going beyond this is outrageously difficult for a cautious, perfectionist person, like me. I am only capable of inching snail-style forward into the abyss, so maybe I will never make art.

We in the ceramics community, are, I have noticed (in journals and at conferences like this), afflicted by more than the average amount of art-world status anxiety. Is what I do art? Why is it that painters can show ceramics (even functional pots) in the top galleries, but ceramicists find it so difficult to gain entry?

Images - Some recent, Australian examples I have gathered....



Brendan Huntley, Tolarno Gallery



Rhys Lee, Karen Woodbury Gallery and Tim Olsen Gallery



Noel McKenna, Niagara Galleries



Peter Cooley, Gould Gallery

I think it's fair to say there's something similar in all these works. They are not technically that complex, they are not self-assured, or beautiful. Viewed within the context of their own time, our time, they are RISKY and RAW. You can see that the artist was willing to FAIL, and you might even say that they look kind of failed in some way. I think that's Duchamp's gap, the mystery of creativity. And I have to admit that I don't see that kind of risk all that often in the work of people who just make ceramics, myself included. We want to succeed

- opening the kiln door provides enough failures, without ignoring all the rules, too. I don't think ceramics is the victim of material based discrimination, or art-world snobbery, it's just that much of the work isn't brave enough.

Now that I've written this whole speech, it occurs to me that I did know all this before I heard Duchamp's paper - "trust your intuition, everything is an experiment, you have to push beyond your limits" - yes, I'm sure you've heard it all before, too. So why, as soon as I heard that speech, did I want to share it with you all? I guess because it's such a hard lesson to learn, I always need to hear it again. We live in a society which values and rewards success, every instinct we have is trained towards achievement and measurable results. And yet when it comes to art, this desire to succeed is the root cause of failure, and it's so subtly pervasive we don't even notice it's undermining us.

The acquisition of skills, and using them once you have gained them, is a pleasure. And we all want more pleasure. Belief in the validity of your rational mind and the cleverness of your ideas provides a pleasing completeness, a relief from the ever present discomfort of 'not knowing'. Days of useless struggle and completely embarrassing incompetence are not wished for, or sought out, by anyone. And yet, it is these days that remind you of your small, human, lack of knowledge, and these days when you might just learn something about yourself. It is only these days which provide the opportunity to work in the gap between intention and realization, and to venture outside the box.

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