

The Fetish of Art in the Twentieth Century

The Case of the *Mona Lisa*¹

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The Theft: The Naked Museum Wall²

The old idea of the masterpiece, the bane of artists throughout the century that is now drawing to a close, is barely recognizable any more. For the general public, this idea remains a facile cliché that is always ready when needed to put an end to a serious discourse on art. Only the label, not the idea itself, was left when artists came to the point of holding masterpieces responsible for the tenacious survival of outdated artistic ideals. The idea of perfected art has become so far removed from the object of its incarnation that we have long been forced to seek the masterpiece by other names. On the other hand, the term masterpiece lends itself to cut-rate uses in which the utopian content is but a dim gleam. The avant-garde, in search of a scapegoat, decries favored artistic objects as false idols or as fetishes of art. The *Mona Lisa*, which did not achieve the status of a universal idol until the nineteenth century, thus became the prime target of ill humor: was it not the very epitome of society's trivialization (and mystification) of art?

Considered with regard to progress, such a popular work embodied everything against which the young artists had declared war: that which belonged to yesterday's art. It simplified the problem of the representation of the world, it conformed to the sentimental expression of ancient times, its fossilized a static conception of the work that perpetuated museum art in a manner dis-

tinctly lacking in glory. Thus, like all the images of worship before it, the painting became the quintessence of all the images to be put down. Suddenly, the aura conferred upon the *Mona Lisa* by the mystique of art stuck to it like cracked varnish. To make way for the inauguration of a new modernity, it was urgently necessary to dig graves in which to bury the cadaverous ideas. Trampling the tomb of the nineteenth century, the new century claimed the title of the sole representative of modernity.

However, the watchwords of progress led to the illusion of escaping once and for all the contradictions of the concept of art. On the tail of art was art, rapidly liquidated, reintroduced with a new face—however vehemently the rationalists denounced the masquerade. Moreover, wherever art was to be shown to the public, the very same museums that had been cast into scorn continued to be used. And the belief in an absolute or pure art, an art that gave the supremacy of the idea precedence over artistic practice, invented new names for old ideals, the very same ideals that had endowed the masterpiece with its original significance. People remained imprisoned by an inescapable dilemma of the modern concept of art. The controversy over the masterpiece, having taken a wrong turn because the discussion was confined to its trivial significance, assumed the contours of a diversionary tactic. For all that, it did not fail to produce the slogans needed to close the ranks of the avant-garde who, in truth, were already splintering in opposite directions.

In Marinetti's manifesto, published in *Le Figaro* in 1909, the futurists mobilized their well-known slogan declaring war against the popular masterpiece: a racing car was deemed more beautiful than the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*. The racing car was certainly faster, or anyway it was faster in a more modern way than the ancient goddess with her wings outspread. The "useless veneration of the past" should no longer be allowed to impede the path towards the future. Even the museums, because they were yesterday's temples, should be closed: they were no more than cemeteries, from which no new life could be expected. People might visit them once a year, as one pays a visit to the family plot on All Saints' Day. It would be enough "to set a bouquet before the *Mona Lisa* once a year," in remembrance of a departed one who could never return to life.

Two years later, the *Mona Lisa* could no longer receive visitors, because it had been stolen in broad daylight from the Louvre: this item monopolized the headlines of the world press on 21 August 1911.

Once more, the painter Louis Bérourd had gone to the Salon Carré to copy the painting that was hung between the works of Titian and Corregio.³ He found the spot empty and informed the Museum administration of the incident. At first, many thought it was a cruel joke, but soon it had to be acknowledged that the unimaginable, as the press soon began to describe it, had taken place, and that there was nothing to do but write the painting's obituary. By the thousands, people made the pilgrimage to the Louvre, in order to stare ecstatically at the spot and the three nails that had held up the painting. People made fun of the cultural State's inability to protect the temple which, along with the cult image, lost its prestige. For some, the naked wall of the museum became from that moment on a tomb that had lost its meaning once and for all through the theft of the corpse. The majority, however, felt not only robbed, but also insulted. And since they could not worship the original, the stolen work became the dead memory of which its detractors had already spoken.

It would not suffice to find the painting again, because nothing could erase the sacrilege of the brutal attack that the theft constituted. The feeling elicited by this theft required an explanation: was the work's true rank sufficiently in keeping with its worldwide celebrity? The *Grande Revue*⁴ invited artists to express their opinions as experts, who quickly showed just how divergent their points of view were. True, Félix Vallotton accorded the *Mona Lisa* the title of masterpiece—"if this concept still means anything." This was a sore point, for the concept had been so devalued as to lose all pertinence. Van Dongen, who was also interviewed, mocked "this painting of historians, poets, and philosophers," who had reinvented it, whereas artists could only be bored by it.

Among young artists and writers, the *Mona Lisa* was the emblem of a false religion. It was the "eternal *Mona Lisa* that paralyzed the forces," as André Salmon wrote before the painting had reappeared. Picasso, he continued, had long since freed himself of the *Mona Lisa* fetish by setting out, in the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, to

“destroy the human face,” whose smile was reflected by the Louvre painting. When they were notified of the great scandal, Picasso and his poet friend Apollinaire hastened to get rid of a small theft from the Louvre that had been consigned to them. Apollinaire was nevertheless arrested in the misplaced hope of tracing a plot hatched by the young rebellion: the theft of the *Mona Lisa*.

With its newly burnished aura, the absent work became irreversibly identified with the cliché that, long paired with it, had now become indistinguishable from the work, and that rendered the work itself virtually superfluous, except as a shadow of the cliché.

When in the early days of September 1911 Max Brod arrived in Paris with Franz Kafka, the lady stolen from the Louvre was plastered all over town, on “advertisements, candy wrappers, and postcards.”⁵ In Milan the two friends had already learned from a newspaper what had happened in Paris. At the Louvre, they joined the line of curious folk staring at the empty spot. It was not for several weeks later that the spot was filled with the portrait of a man by Raphael. The *Mona Lisa* was thenceforth among those “invisible curiosities” of which Kafka had spoken when he had described a nighttime taxi trip across Munich, during which he had been flooded with the names of monuments that he was unable to see.

The invisibility of the original was inverted into the total visibility of a cliché that, reproduced thousands of times over, invested the entire field. The loss of visibility was an added gain of glory, as would have been the case with a celebrity whose residence would have been sought out. There have been periods when the visibility of celebrated cult images has been purposefully limited, in order to authorize their apparition only as a rare privilege. But this time the new invisibility, provoked by an attack, was of another type, one that only reinforced the absence of the work, which was in any case necessary in order to be replaced completely and absolutely by reproductions. The *Mona Lisa* had long since functioned as a visual slogan evoking the specificity of art. On the most famous museum image of all, which was now a stolen work, the mysterious smile withered in a slogan that no longer required any special degree of education. The multiplica-

tion belonged to its truth, to the extent that the spectator himself was content to register the celebrity, instead of looking at it.

Every copy always presupposes an original against which it is measured, but this time, this specificity of art, its trademark, could no longer be copied, because it had to be cited. The true original was no longer the work of Leonardo, but rather a cliché. The more numerous were those who claimed to have something to say about art, the more welcome was the mere citation of a work that even experts derided. It was therefore understandable that experts in Italian art, such as Bernard Berenson and Roberto Longhi, came out stubbornly against the work, which to them was no longer an object of knowledge since it now belonged to the masses, who—as both of them thought—idolized it blindly.

In 1932 Henri Focillon devoted a study to prints that had made the *Mona Lisa* known since the nineteenth century.⁶ “Romanticism and lithography are what have made da Vinci’s work popular.” But in lithos—where, in a somewhat idealistic fashion, he claimed to see a “history of sensibility”—the smile had always already been interpreted and demonized, in such a way that it retroacted upon the original and sucked it down into the eddies of cliché. When Gustave Le Gray, a former painter, showed a series of photographs of the *Mona Lisa* at the exhibition of the French Society of Photography, the model he used was a drawing made in pencil after the original, a drawing by Aimé Millet that had enjoyed a degree of success in the Salon of 1849.⁷ Photography nullified any difference from the original; the visitor could even admire the work in various lightings and tonalities that were mutually equivalent, so that the original remained projected at a spectral distance.

Only the original could be stolen; some however saw the theft as a Dadaist act. The theft implied an absurd reversal of the logic of mass media, for it took the existence of the original seriously, whereas a cliché could not be stolen; it could only be a target of mockery. Parodies became imitations of the theft, at the same time as they imposed themselves as negatively charged acts of worship. The sublime for which a masterpiece was an incomparable vehicle took refuge in the mirror of the trivial. The affront represented by this stripping bare had the particular quality of going unredressed. The public, already made to feel powerless, had to

accept an additional sacrilege before which it was defenseless: the shameless enjoyment of the theft.

The humiliation inflicted on the masterpiece led to a drop in the prestige of painting. The boulevard press published a series of photographs of theater women "whose smiles are still here."⁸ They were all attired in mourning clothes, but their mourning was impudent since these living actresses, bearers of new clichés, were loved more brazenly than was the august phantom of the Louvre. Even the avant-garde hardly showed originality when it made fun of the recovered painting, with the futurist Ardengo Soffici placing at her feet the funeral wreath of which Marinetti had already spoken in 1909. The thief, an Italian, had returned the painting after two years, in the vain hope that it would be displayed in the Uffizi, where it was "at home." The joy of reunion was brief, for the painting had lost its honor, as it were; it had become a boulevard celebrity. It was at this point that Dadaist acts began for real, repeating in a forced imitation a theft that had been unique.

Kafka at the Cinema

Three weeks later, on 9 September 1911, when Kafka and Brod arrived in Paris, the theft of the *Mona Lisa* was still front-page news.⁹ That same day they went to contemplate the spot from where the world's most famous image had disappeared, and the following evening they were engrossed in the unfurling images of a shadow play. They sought diversion in "the blinding tremulous white screen" of the film theater "Omnia Pathé" in the Parisian comedy of silent film, full of gags. "At the end, after the gunshots, the races and chases, and the required boxing scene, came the news. Included of course was the news that was on every advertisement ... and postcard in Paris: the *Mona Lisa*." Max Brod describes here a five-minute sketch, filmed by Brusquet almost immediately after the theft: *Nick Winter et le vol de la Joconde*. It was one of the Dadaist activities provoked by the event, but the slapstick farce belonged to the genre of cinematographic comedy.

The director of the Louvre, roused from his bed by the sensational event, runs through the streets towards the museum, "his

suspenders trailing behind him." But there, a shoe button, whose owner had been frantically sought in all the cafés of Paris, causes his downfall. "Then comes the final blow: while everybody runs through the rooms of the Louvre in a tizzy, the thief slips into the museum carrying the *Mona Lisa*, replaces it where it had hung, and in exchange takes Velázquez's *Infante*. Nobody notices him. Suddenly, to everyone's surprise, someone sees the *Mona Lisa*. A note in the corner of the replaced painting explains: 'Sorry, I am nearsighted. I really wanted the painting next to this one.'" Max Brod tries to match his description to the choppy rhythm of the series of images. The arrest of the museum director is already quite funny, but when the thief, unseen, brings back the painting that he didn't want, that he had mixed up with another one, the comedy explodes. A photogram published by Hans Zischler shows a parody of the theft: the thief, sneaking in to exchange the painting, hides it behind his back so as not to be noticed, despite this shot that could hardly be more obvious. He is the only person in all of Paris who is not interested in the painting: another way of turning things topsy-turvy.

This does not mean that as a result the *Mona Lisa* achieves the status of a film heroine; rather, she is carted through the scene like a lifeless prop. The true heroes, who give the animated images their rhythm, are the actors, halfway between acrobat and clown. Speed is the virtue of this medium. In the film, the museum's paintings, like memories of another time, seem to beg for the attention that they used to attract. The theme of the film, which turned the current event into a farce, was not the painting, but rather the theft. The spectacle of the "Cinéma Pathé Frères" was seamlessly followed by other short films. "We saw, yes, we saw countless things—like an eight-act comedy performed without interruption. Then there was the *Journal Pathé*. And in order to make the whole thing look like a newspaper, there was first the title page with the phrase "Third year.""

The newspaper is not the only analogy that this cinematographic experience suggests. In the dark theater, the two friends again experience the feeling of being absorbed by the automated traffic of the city that flows next them, just as rapidly as the film and with the same indifference to them. They can no longer play the *flâneur* who remains the master of his movements, but rather,

relentlessly and involuntarily, they are submerged in impressions that allow no distancing, no personal point of view. In the metro, the swarm of images drowned out all but the Dubonnet ad in the eyes of the "sad and idle passengers." "Language excluded by the traffic," in which only signals and silent actions exist, also suggested a parallel with silent film. This "Paris seen in hachures," as Kafka called it, was an attempt to fragment the impressions of things, in accordance with the facts. The hachuring attracted the eye more than the shapes that had generated them. "The rain of hachures is the cinematographic screen, the projection behind which the city is perceived" (Zischler).

It seemed to Kafka that language was no longer capable of holding on to images that spilled forth uninterruptedly, whereas, previously, it had been easy for him to describe what met his gaze. The new images stripped everyone of the gaze that could have been transposed into language. Kafka was to return to this problem in his journal of his 1911 travels in the north of Bohemia, where he saw once again what was called the "imperial panorama," in which one could observe stereoscopic images for seconds at a time. "The images are more lively than at the cinematograph, because they bring the gaze into accord with the tranquility of the real. The cinematograph contaminates what is seen by the restlessness of its movement; the calm of the gaze is more important." In the mechanical reconstitution of rapid images, the gaze itself was no longer allowed to work, because it lost the strength to see by itself. It seemed to Kafka that the last anchoring points, amid the uninterrupted flow of images, were the advertising posters that were used to promote films outside cinematographic theaters. And when he perceived them in the midst of city traffic, they became this promenade of posters that had replaced the museum collection of images.

It was for all these reasons that the theft of the *Mona Lisa* resembled an organized farce to such an extent: it unleashed a static image whose eternal place was the museum room. The smile of the *Mona Lisa* held the gaze with a hypnotic force of attraction, all the more so because it did not change, except in the imagination of the patient observer. Popular humor found an apt expression for the theft when it had the *Mona Lisa* loop-the-loop in an airplane during the carnival parade of 1912.¹⁰ On postcards of the

period, she could be seen from a train compartment, telling the observer that she wished to return to the Louvre. The masterpiece was the supreme model not only of art, but also of the static image, if only because it demanded to be looked at for a long time. The drop in prestige experienced by traditional art reflects the loss of power of the image at rest, henceforth pursued by the “time-image” (Gilles Deleuze) seeking to supplant it. In the flux of the motion picture, all that was left for the old images was to take refuge on the shores of remembrance; they were created for another type of perception.

Already in the nineteenth century, the experience of the railroad, annihilating the foreground of the gaze, had modified the perception of space; Kafka reflected upon this when he read Goethe’s travel journal. The tempo of automated movement forced the observer into a new visual mobility. The Italian futurists reacted inelegantly to this transformed world by artificially introducing speed as a simple gesture in works of art that, as framed canvases, are in essence closed to all further movement. Since then, the paradoxical simulation of movement in the plastic arts has continued without end. It is because its aspiration to eternity was false that the masterpiece was hastily dismissed. But perhaps it was art itself that was based on a false impulse—at least, if we keep hoping to pin it down it in works at rest. It was easier to insist on its opposition to the ceaseless escapist movement of the modern environment.

The young Marcel Duchamp, with his infallible sense of pithy gestures, touched at the heart of this paradox quite early on when he painted his *Nu descendant un escalier* in 1912. The painting was provocative not so much for its presentation of the unfolding of movement as for its title. Indeed, what could be more antagonistic than a classical nude and a movement-image such as photography had developed in the nineteenth century? The fixed frame is enough to turn this mobility into a mockery, and the act of descending the staircase (rather seldom practiced by the nudes of the past) provided only an appearance of causality. It is therefore hardly surprising that the cubists rejected from their Salon des Indépendants a painting whose irony they could not help but suspect. Not until the following year, at the Armory Show in the

United States, did the painting provoke the intended scandal; the public there was not yet familiar with the subtleties of modernism. But it did not take long for the artist himself to stop painting pictures. He had expressed in a way that could not be surpassed the paradox that consists of attempting to reconcile the new mobility of images with the old concept of the work of art.

Ready-Mades and Other Manifestos

It was during these same years that Marcel Duchamp acquired products sold commercially that he was to sign as his own works. The debate over "*ready-mades*" was not to begin for decades, but antagonism vis-a-vis the concept of the work of art had been a motor for bizarre actions from the beginning. This became quite obvious six years later, when Duchamp signed, as a *ready-made*, a color reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*. But this note appeared only as a proclamation on the same order as other actions attacking the status of a work of art that had become problematic. Other artists, led by Malevitch and Léger, had their own strategy: they cited the *Mona Lisa* as an aged artistic icon that, in the context of a renovated artistic language, appears as a foreign word that will always be superfluous. Men of letters also signed such "proclamations" to declare outright their adherence to a radical modernity. But what characterizes all of these efforts is that they showed to what extent the popular masterpiece continued to unsettle people's minds.

The *ready-mades* could be said to embody the anti-masterpiece par excellence. But at the same time they take to its zenith the former predominance of the idea over the work, a predominance that was inherent to the conception of the masterpiece. Duchamp himself did not forge the concept until he traveled to New York in 1915. In a letter dated 15 January 1916, the artist asked his sister Suzanne to sign his name to the bottle carrier that she would find in his studio. "Here in New York I have bought objects of the same type, which I call *ready-mades*.¹¹ You know English well enough to understand the meaning of "already finished" that I am giving to these objects. I sign them and give them a title in English." Duchamp's sister also found in the studio the front wheel of

a bicycle (here again a subtle parody of the integration of movement into the work of art). Among the sculptures in a New York exhibition of the same year appeared two *ready-mades*, labeled as such in the catalogue.

But the true scandal, provoked by Duchamp at the first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, was unleashed only by the "Richard Mutt case." Preserving his anonymity, Duchamp signed the name of a certain Richard Mutt to a urinal that he entered under the title *Fountain*.¹² When the entry was rejected by the jury, even though according to the statutes of the artists' association Duchamp had a right to participate, he could resign in protest from his seat on the jury without arousing the suspicion of merely defending his own rights. The affair had been perfectly concocted, and it revealed dramatically the limits that were set upon artistic liberty, even by artists themselves, because they measured the work by the standard of an idea of art on which there existed no consensus. When, as planned, Duchamp failed in this way, he played an additional card, by starting a debate on the "Richard Mutt case" in the magazine *The Blind Man*. The rejected work was reproduced in an image by the renowned photographer Alfred Stieglitz who, in this case, took sides in favor of artistic freedom. This photograph conferred an additional aura on its controversial subject. The strategy of demasking the fiction of the reconciled essence of the work of art could not have been more successful.

What was it, then, that made a work a work of art, and what justified it as the invention of an artist? How is it that we agree to identify a pictorial representation with its title, that is, with a pure and simple affirmation? Was it as a woman or as art that the *Mona Lisa* smiled, and didn't her smile belong rather to Leonardo, who invented her, than to the woman who smiles at us? In the specific case at hand, the androgynous thematics served to acknowledge that, in the final analysis, such questions could no longer be answered. In the case of the *ready-mades* Duchamp, with his signature, declared as a work an object that he had not *made*, but rather had found *already made*. The new strategy required that a bottle carrier and the *Mona Lisa* be placed on the same footing.

Kazimir Malevitch adopts a completely different position in this discussion when, in 1914, he paints the small oil painting with the ambiguous title *Composition with Mona Lisa* (Saint Petersburg, Russian National Museum).¹³ The artist, who continues to make use of Cubist collage in order to engage in an antagonistic discourse against art, presents us here with a hybrid between a work and a criticism of work. The tableau is a *work* inasmuch as it seeks to invent a non-representational world simply through the surfaces of its colors. It is a *criticism of a work* inasmuch as it cites, in this same context, a dated conception of the work that is identified with the cliché of the *Mona Lisa*. An inexpensive color reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*, carelessly torn at the top, is glued onto the canvas like an exhibit of criminal evidence. The smiling woman is scribbled over with red on her face and throat, a gesture whereby Malevitch opposes representative art down to its humanistic conception of man. Thus the masterpiece is purely and simply identified with the illusion engendered by its reproductions, through which art has been sullied (alienated from its purity).

In his manuscript on suprematism, which Malevitch left behind in Berlin when he left the city abruptly in 1927, the critique of representative art is linked to the critique of a culture that has sundered man from his oneness with nature: portraits are neither as living as people themselves, nor as truly artistic as an art that has been purged of any taint that is foreign to art. "Portraits and still lives [*natures mortes*] are in reality two sorts of "dead nature," just as culture as a whole is made up of dead things. Representative art is doubly *dead*, because on the one hand it represents petrified culture, and on the other hand it kills reality by seeking to represent it." The life of art could not be constituted from a borrowed life based on an imitation. The cult of the recovered *Mona Lisa*—how apt that it was in Paris that this cult eclipsed the sun of true art!—was for Malevitch an example of false artistic consciousness. The Moscow real estate advertisement glued underneath the *Mona Lisa* thus appears as an ironic footnote, unless it is integrated with the "No!" that crosses out the artistic fetish: "We won't have any of that in Moscow."

Fernand Léger makes himself heard, although he does so on other points, through similar manifestos. He too attacks the scare-

crow of the *Mona Lisa* when, at the end of the 1920s, he sees his machinist aesthetic threatened by a wave of nostalgia for the old artistic myth.¹⁴ The *Mona Lisa with Keys* (1930, Biot, Musée national Fernand-Léger) is a plea against the bourgeois tradition of the canvas painting. The *Mona Lisa*, which is copied from a postcard, but cruelly deprived of her smile, pales behind the magnificent key ring whose metallic beauty is celebrated by the painter. Léger argues not against the representative in general, but against a false hierarchy, against the hierarchy of the profound *subject*, supposed to be superior to the *object* which is free of meaning.

This is why he liked to tell the story of the genesis of his painting. Having already painted the key ring, he was looking for something that would “represent its perfect opposite.” This is when he found, in a shop window, a postcard of the *Mona Lisa*. “To me she is an object like no other.” In the essay on “machine aesthetics,” he argued in favor of a plastic beauty that has neither meaning nor model, that is, that is stripped of anything that does not belong to the physical form itself. This calls for freedom from old artistic doctrine. This is why he considered the cult of “the Italian Renaissance (of the *Mona Lisa*) as the most colossal of mistakes.” It represented only decadence, and therefore a concept of art that had no use. These first pictorial citations of the *Mona Lisa*, in contrast to later parodies, were presented as serious manifestos in which the *Mona Lisa* was unmasked as an idol that prevented a new concept of art from being born.

Starting in the 1920s, writers joined in the act of dismantling the artistic fetish that their nineteenth-century predecessors had invented. In 1922 Aldous Huxley wrote ironically of the *Gioconda smile* in his novella of the same title.¹⁵ His character Miss Spence had doggedly practiced the smile in order to impress her lover: “It was part of the *Gioconda business*.” In this way she nearly succeeded in deceiving him as to her true nature, but in the end a murder reveals that she is no other than the *femme fatale* who was also lurking behind the smile of the renowned model. The image, respectable in the meantime, could be transposed to the story of another life. André Gide, in his great 1925 novel *Les Faux-monnayeurs* (*The Counterfeiters*), declares himself ceremoniously a follower of the avant-garde and of its actions against the fetish of art.

“What is stupid is the admiration devoted to it. It is the habit people have of speaking about what are called ‘masterpieces’ only with their hats respectfully lowered.” Gide places these words in the mouth of a young anarchist who is about to publish a new journal. To this end, the anarchist envisions a “reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*, to which have been glued a pair of mustaches.”¹⁶

The *Mona Lisa*'s Beard

It is not difficult to see from where Gide borrowed this idea: it was none other than Marcel Duchamp who had perpetrated this attack, the most famous of all, upon the *Mona Lisa*, by drawing a beard on her. However, Gide did not know that Picabia had published this beard without Duchamp's knowledge. As always when Duchamp is involved, things are confused enough that we must begin by untangling the twisted strands of the story.¹⁷ The fact is that in 1919 Duchamp signed a postcard of the *Mona Lisa* as a *ready-made*, and that he provided her with a beard and a mustache (private collection). Before taking the image to New York, he had also shown it to Picabia. But Picabia needed something eye-catching for his review 391 when he was to publish the “Dada Manifesto” in 1920. He therefore used another reproduction and, since he did not have Duchamp's signature, he entitled it *Tableau Dada* by Duchamp. It is thus as if Duchamp's *ready-made* serves as an original for this reproduction—a reproduction that distinguishes itself from the pseudo-original more than Picabia realizes. He had in fact forgotten the beard that resembled Napoleon III's, and this is why Gide could speak only of a mustache. But Picabia had acted entirely on personal initiative here, because Duchamp had never signed up as flag-bearer for the Dadaists. If we really wish to understand Duchamp's idea, we must look elsewhere.

Let us therefore, once more, begin at the beginning. Duchamp brought two souvenirs to New York to present them to the Arenbergs, his patrons: a glass bottle “filled with Parisian air,” and the Parisian postcard of the *Mona Lisa*. The latter, a reproduction, was just as much a product for consumption as the bottle, but Duchamp had signed it—and he had also added the beard and the

mustache, so that the woman became a man and the famous smile disappeared. Thus was born a product that existed in only one specimen, just like the original in the Louvre. The title of the painting is also part of the creation of a *ready-made*. It should have been *Mona Lisa*, but Duchamp, as always, makes a play on words that admits two readings. If one pronounces the five French letters phonetically, one finds oneself involuntarily uttering an obscene remark about the woman: *L. H. O. O. Q.* ("*Elle a chaud au cul*"). But if one pronounces the five letters in English, the result, given the benefit of the doubt, approximates the word *look*. The problem of what was really meant had become as it were insoluble.

The interpretation of the beard had already been a dead-end endeavor. It could of course be read as a provocation: wasn't the lady of the Louvre reputed to embody the eternal feminine ideal? In 1909, in a widely distributed paper, the caricaturist L. Métivet had published a drawing on which the beard of a male observer was reflected in the *Mona Lisa*, which had just been placed under glass. Shortly thereafter, a vociferous debate began over the bearded Castiglione of Raphael's portrait occupying the spot in the Louvre that had been left empty by the theft of the *Mona Lisa*. The beard by Duchamp's hand seems to constitute an attack, not only against the identity but also against the eternal youth of a masterpiece, now overtaken by hirsutism.

But Duchamp had always clung to another interpretation, which he later described as follows: "The strange thing about this beard is that it makes the *Mona Lisa* into a man. She is then not a woman disguised as a man, but a real man." Why was it important to alter her gender? Because in this way Duchamp unveiled the deceptive nature of images: in the case of the bearded *Mona Lisa*, the impression of seeing a man was deceptive—as was the impression of seeing a woman on the bottle of perfume that Duchamp had published in 1921 on the front page of *New York Dada*: the label shows the artist with a woman's hair style and a hat. The puzzle of what we are seeing cannot be resolved simply by an act of naming (what I see is the same thing as what is over there). Once again, the deception is inseparable from the artist's intention.

In any case, the artist is fascinated by the ambiguity of the sex change, for at the time the artist was conventionally a man, whose works were therefore a masculine product, even if they depicted women. In the case of Leonardo, the androgynous enigma had already led some to speculate that the *Mona Lisa* might secretly be a woman. Thus, it would not be coincidental that Duchamp concocted his *ready-made* in 1919, the year of the four hundredth anniversary of Leonardo's death. Which Leonardo actually died that year? And how would he have acted in the modern era? We thus find ourselves in a surprising about-face: Duchamp is certainly mocking the popular fetish of art, but at the same time he is championing Leonardo, to the point of identifying with him. A number of clues, both in his work and in his writing, point us in this direction. If the idea of painting the *Mona Lisa* came from Leonardo, and if Leonardo had in his painting concealed the subject's male identity, then this same idea could be reused. The possible permutations of the theme are limitless. And suddenly the masterpiece is back; it lives off the enigma, not the enigma of the smile but the enigma of the idea that turns out to be an *idea of art* that is difficult to penetrate. Thus, behind the apparent banality of the discourse, Duchamp unearths the great utopia that had been the masterpiece's *passe-partout* at its inception.

Duchamp's new *Mona Lisa* did not simply have the makings of parody, it also staged itself as a work, over which Duchamp lays claim as its creator. Such an occasion presented itself in 1941, when he finished his personal pocket-size museum (*La Boîte-en-valise*). If his works indeed existed as ideas of works, then it was only logical to show them by means of a valise. To this end, he had reproductions of a previously unequalled quality made, including even works that no one had ever seen exhibited. The valise contained in some sense all the variants of what to Duchamp represented the discourse of art. He also showed the bearded *Mona Lisa* with this surprising comment: "*Ready-made, rectified.*" The postcard was not only a low-cost reproduction, it also represented an image that could be corrected.

But what could "rectification" possibly mean? Once again, Duchamp leaves us with fascinating possibilities. The simplest, undeniably, consists of thinking of the intervention that trans-

formed the low-cost reproduction into a work. In 1944, Duchamp had the "original" of his *ready-made* certified by a New York notary. But the possibilities do not stop there. It is well known that the old *Mona Lisa* is not signed. It is only now that she received the true signature of an artist, correcting in a paradoxical fashion her lack of authenticity as a work. But the most fascinating possibility in Duchamp's eyes was that of being able to correct Leonardo's idea and, as it were, to demask it at the same time. On this point, all that remains to be clarified is the fact that any great work derives its life from an idea, and that Duchamp shows his understanding of the idea.

The game could go on indefinitely. The various stages have been described so often that two examples will suffice here to make the principle clear. There is first of all a drawing that Duchamp made in 1941 for the publication of a poem by Georges Hugnet and that he signed. This drawing depicted none other than the beard cut off the *Mona Lisa*, delicately outlined with graphite dust (Paris, private collection). The *Mona Lisa's* beard was Duchamp's intellectual property, and in the eyes of anyone versed in the history of art it possessed its own identity. One might speak of it as an invisible masterpiece. The same applies even better to the "shaved *Mona Lisa*," our second example. Duchamp had made it in 1965, and again signed it as a *ready-made*, for the invitation to a retrospective. Of course, the "shaved woman," as Duchamp called it, was none other than a postcard, this time unchanged, but it was no less an authentic Duchamp. Only his signature pushes us to look for the beard and to add it mentally. The shaved beard was none other than the idea of the beard, which Duchamp was now content to name without even representing it any more.

This is the old paradox of the invisible masterpiece. The utopian concept of art, which used to be sought in the masterpiece, emerges as an archaeological discovery of the accumulated temporal strata. Duchamp, like Picasso, reveals his deeply intimate knowledge of the old concept. But when his thought games were taken as the inventions of a radical modernism, he was misunderstood. In reality, this is a version of the Balzacian theme, transposed into modern language. It was only with time that the

Mona Lisa became a handy rallying cry for art. This explains the fact that the *Mona Lisa* provided the occasion for great minds to diverge, once the majority had begun to consider it a rallying symbol in favor of older art, which is precisely that from which artists wanted to distance themselves. In the drama that swirled around the *Mona Lisa*, Duchamp remains the great exception, because he was not content with cheap parodies.

Around the World with a Cliché

The cliché that the public sought in the *Mona Lisa* was in no way affected by all that, and the mass media and popular culture only exaggerated it. This is demonstrated by the avalanches of persiflage unleashed at the time; and it must be acknowledged that it was in the domain of advertising that they remained the most tolerable.¹⁸ During the 1950s, the vogue of the *Mona Lisa* attained a new height, as if the famous portrait had been forced to testify against the worldwide monopoly of abstract art. Once again, the public could satisfy its desires to worship an official artistic fetish, which in 1959 even made it to the front page of the news magazine *Der Spiegel*. Films were made on the subject and, in a special supplement to the journal *Bizarre*, people wondered about the meaning and nonsense of this anachronistic “jocondolâtrie.” But artists participated in exhibitions that gave them a chance to flood the market with their paraphrases. The 1960 *Mona Lisa Show* at the Treadwell Gallery in London inaugurated this agenda, which reached its first zenith in 1965 at the Fels gallery in Paris, in an exhibition underwritten silently by Marcel Duchamp.

In the meantime, commentators had made themselves heard in order to save the work from the status of mere cliché. Thus, according to Albert Besnard’s preface to Picasso’s illustrations of Balzac’s *Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu*, a preface he may have discussed with Picasso, what makes a work a masterpiece is not its supposed perfection. The *Mona Lisa* also contains errors of taste, but for all that—perhaps even because of it—the work’s vitality continues to fascinate observers. André Malraux, whose *Musée imaginaire* had contributed so much to leveling art the world over, still

wanted to give up the idea of the masterpiece when, during the final days of the war, he wrote of “the most famous and the most maligned work” that in truth it stood alone and was still misunderstood.¹⁹ He saw “the most subtle homage that genius could pay to a living face” as an autonomous proof of art. From the standpoint of the history of art, it was not until 1952 that Charles de Tolnay published the first comprehensive work on the painting, after a specific monograph had failed to achieve publication. Seeking to uncover Leonardo’s inventiveness in the genre of the portrait, he suggested that for the first time the smile conferred an inner life upon the face depicted in painting. This gift of the soul is precisely what had so clashed with the avant-garde, because it had been fetishized by bourgeois society.

Not long thereafter, Malraux, who in the meantime had become Minister of Culture under Charles de Gaulle, found himself presented with the opportunity to give a speech on the painting, which had just been received in the United States like a head of State.²⁰ On 8 January 1963 the President of the United States in person inaugurated the exhibition at the National Gallery in Washington, in the presence of 2000 honored guests—an event that had never before transpired in the history of American presidents. The speeches by Kennedy and Malraux illustrate the subtle display of power in which the two nations indulged at one of the critical moments of the Cold War. Through the *Mona Lisa*, France was saluted as a nation of culture, but the two States congratulated each other on their alliance in a free world, a symbol of which they saw in the world-renowned work of art. The gesture was purely political, but the flood of visitors proved that the public conformed to a need for worship that few among them would have been able to justify. Notwithstanding the difficulty of seeing much behind the bullet-proof shield, the experience of the aura emanated from an original that existed in only one specimen, but which in reality embodied only the myth. In reality, there is no specificity of the original that distinguishes it as such. Here the fetish of the original has itself become a cliché.

This sensational success was replayed by the painting’s travels to Tokyo and Moscow in 1974, and the Japanese smashed all the records of mass suggestion. However, it was only in the United

States that the fallout was truly significant, for the art scene, very active there, saw a provocation in the idolatrous worship paid to the timeless work of art, just as the European avant-garde had previously felt. But in the meantime, modernity had gained a broad following, in such a way that one could ironically engage in polemics with the *Mona Lisa*. Moreover, the lady who had just arrived possessed, to American eyes, the venerable age of European culture with its concept of foreign culture. The appearance of the masterpiece and of its aura no long corresponded with the idea that a mass consumption–worshipping democracy had of itself. The imported artistic spectacle thus offered a choice theme for Pop Art, which in 1963 had just become gained a foothold (at least within a limited art scene).

The same year, Andy Warhol published a series of prints of the *Mona Lisa*. In these silkscreen prints made after reproductions, he Americanized the repro-*Mona Lisa* as a media heroine.²¹ He thus posed the expected question of the quality of the commodity into which the aura had been transformed. The aura of the commodity is of another type, which comes from a unique propagation. This unique commodity can be found everywhere as soon as all buyers wish to acquire the same product. Consumption, as the worship of the commodity, was also visible in the cultural spectacle organized around the masterpiece on exhibit. The *Mona Lisa* was a successful commodity, because of the streams of visitors that it tapped, and because of the media that honored it with their presence. Nevertheless, it was an original such as does not exist in the world of consumption. It possessed a privileged status that could be contested only on condition of establishing a parallel with star worship. A movie star, whom everyone knows but nobody knows personally (in the original), exists only in the media, because, outside the media, the star is a private person.

The silkscreen *Thirty Are Better Than One* carries this idea to its ultimate consequence. As if spit out from a rotary press, the same decals of the star followed one after another, image upon image, reproductions of reproductions, on a large sheet of paper. A single *Mona Lisa* would not prove anything, but thirty *Mona Lisas* indicates success in the media, for which success, therefore, the crudest cartoon would do. In the same way, Warhol published

American icons such as Marilyn Monroe or Kennedy's widow, like tin cans produced by the media, without even naming the individual's identity. In the case of the *Mona Lisa*, Warhol proceeded similarly, although the parallel is not obvious. Just as Marilyn Monroe is not recognized as a *person*, so the *Mona Lisa* is not recognized as a *work* that exists behind its reproductions. In the media, the image was massively widespread in the form of reproductions. In this public presence, there were no differences. Thus Warhol maliciously replaces the masterpiece with the cliché, and obviously he was not the only one to do so. If it was no longer anything but a rallying symbol for art, one could deny the *Mona Lisa* any reality as a work beyond the stereotypes of its reproductions *ad infinitum*.

With distance, the American episode appears as a sort of rehearsal, since the cliché of art continued nonetheless to live as a cliché that could not be openly fought or subversively appropriated. It would have been fascinating to be present at a conversation between Duchamp and Warhol on the theme of fiction in the concept of art. Perhaps this conversation took place in New York during this period. For, all things considered, Duchamp's "shaved" *Mona Lisa* was only two years younger than Warhol's series of thirty. At the time, initiates had long known the difference between vulgar parodies of popular culture, in which everything was leveled, and challenging images produced by the avant-garde, in which the aesthetic discourse continued to be subtly woven.

*Translated from the French by Jennifer Curtiss Gage
French translation from the German by Denis Trierweiler*

Notes

1. This text is part of the book *Das unsichtbare Meisterwerk. Die modernen Mythen der Kunst* (Munich, forthcoming).
2. A. Chastel, *L'Illustré inconnu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988); S. V. Reit, *The Day They Stole the Mona Lisa* (New York, 1981); R. McMullen, *Mona Lisa: The Picture and the Myth* (Boston, 1975); Exhibition catalogue *Mona Lisa im 20. Jahrhundert* (Duisberg, 1978).
3. See his 1909 painting, *Le salon carré*, which shows him in the process of copying (Paris, Musée du Louvre).
4. *Copier Créer*, exhibition catalogue, Musée du Louvre, 26 April - 29 July 1993, Paris, RMN, pp. 412 ff.
5. H. Zischler, *Kafka geht ins Kino* (Hambourg, 1996).
6. H. Focillon, "La *Joconde* et ses interprètes," in *Technique et sentiment* (Paris, 1932), pp. 78 ff.
7. *Copier Créer*, *op. cit.*, note 3 above.
8. See in particular in *Comédia Illustré*, 1911, the photograph of "Mademoiselle Distinguel, des Variétés."
9. H. Zischler, *op. cit.*
10. A. Chastel, *op. cit.*, note 2 above.
11. *Translator's note*: Duchamp consistently uses the term in English.
12. W. A. Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp's Fountain* (Houston, 1989).
13. Catalogue *K. Malevitch* (New York: Metropolitan Museum, 1991), no. 41.
14. J.-L. Ferrier, "Comment se délivrer de la *Joconde*," in *Hommage à Fernand Léger* (Paris, 1971), pp. 83 ff.
15. A. Huxley, *The Gioconda Smile and Other Stories* (London, 1984), pp. 103 ff.
16. André Gide, *Romans, Récits et Soties. Oeuvres lyriques* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, Gallimard, 1958), pp. 1229-1230; *The Counterfeiters*, trans. Dorothy Bussy (New York: 1947).
17. R. Bonk, *La-Boîte-en-valise* (Paris, 1958), and *Copier Créer*, *op. cit.*, note 3 above, pp. 340, 414, 421 ff, as well as the exhibition catalogue *Mona Lisa im 20. Jahrhundert* (Duisberg, 1978).
18. M. R. Storey, *Mona Lisa* (New York, 1980).
19. A. Malraux, *Les voix du silence III* (Paris, 1951), p. 462.
20. J. Walker, *Self-Portrait with Donors* (Boston, 1969); F. Zöllner, "J. F. Kennedy and Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*," in W. Kesten, ed., *Radical Art History* (Zurich, 1997), pp. 467 ff.
21. *Andy Warhol Retrospective* (Cologne, 1990), no. 237, 238, 235, 236; *Copier Créer*, *op. cit.*, no. 310.

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Kubismus, Cologne, 1966, pp. 88 ff; E. Lipton, *Picasso Criticism*, London, 1976, p. 80. Apollinaire too wrote about the theft: see H. Düchting (ed.), *Apollinaire*, Cologne, 1990, p. 125, p. 331. On art historians, see R. Longhi, "Le Due Lisa," in *La Voce*, vol. VI, 1914, no. 1; H. Focillon, "La *Joconde* et ses interprètes," in *Technique et sentiment*, Paris, 1932, pp. 78 ff.

Kafka at the Cinema: On Max Brod and Franz Kafka's visit to Paris, and on the film that they saw, see H. Zischler, *Kafka geht ins Kino*, Hamburg, 1996, pp. 86 ff (on the film), p. 58 (on the taxi ride through Munich), p. 40 (the panorama), p. 68 (Paris), p. 73 (film and journal). On the publication of the journals, see M. Brod / F. Kafka, *Eine Freundschaft*, vol. I, *Reiseaufzeichnungen*, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1987; F. Kafka, *Resisetagebücher in der Fassung der Handschrift*, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1994. On silent film, see S. Kracauer, *Kino*, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1974, pp. 16 ff. (written in 1951). G. Deleuze, *Cinéma 2. L'Image-Temps*, Paris, Minuit, 1985. On the nineteenth century, D. Sternberger, *Panorama oder Ansichten des 19. Jahrhunderts*, 1934, Berlin, 1955. On the railroad, W. Schivelbusch, *Geschichte der Eisenbahnreise*, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1989. On Duchamp's 1911 nude, see the catalogue *Duchamp*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1984, no. 32.

Ready-Mades: Noteworthy among recent titles in a field too vast to exhaust are: Th. Zaunschirm, *Bereites Mädchen. Ready-Made*, Klagenfurt, 1983. Catalogue *Duchamp*, 1984. H. Molderings, *Marcel Duchamp*, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1987. On the "Richard Mutt Case," see W. A. Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp, Fountain*, Houston, 1989. On Malevitch's painting, see the catalogue published by E. Weiss, Cologne, 1995; the catalogue of the exhibition *Kazimir Malevitch*, New York, 1991; the catalogue *Mona Lisa*, Duisburg, 1978, p. 196. On belonging to the suprematist movement, see C. Malevitch, *Suprematismus. Die Gegenstandslose Welt*, Cologne, 1989, p. 118. On Léger's painting, see J.-L. Ferrier, "Comment se débarrasser de la *Joconde*?" in *Hommage à F. Léger*, Paris, 1971, pp. 82 ff. On the crisis around 1930, see R. Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia*, New Haven, 1995, pp. 53 ff. For Léger's text, see F. Léger, *Fonctions de la peinture*, Paris, 1965, pp. 53 ff. A. Huxley's text, *The Gioconda Smile and Other Stories*, London, 1984, pp. 103 ff; *The Gioconda Smile: A Play*, London, 1948; A. Gide, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs [The Counterfeiters]*, see note 13 above.

Mona Lisa's Beard: On the 1919 *Mona Lisa* and its publication by Picabia, see S. Salzmann and Th. Reff in the catalogue *Mona Lisa*, Duisburg, 1978, pp. 57 ff., pp. 79 ff., pp. 198 ff. E. Bonk, *Marcel Duchamp. Die grosse Schachtel*, Munich, 1989, pp. 241 ff. On the debate over Castiglione and the empty wall, see R. de la Sizeranne, in *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1912. Concerning the pseudonym Rose Sélavy, used by Duchamp starting in 1920 (for Man Ray's photograph of the bottle of perfume on the front pages in New York: Bonk, *Dada*, 1989, p. 247), there are numerous statements and allusions by Duchamp; see also Bonk, 1989, on *La-boîte-en-valise*, p. 97. On the subsequent metamorphoses of the beard, the catalogue *Mona Lisa*, Duisburg, pp. 202 ff. Concerning the reception of Duchamp, see S. Gohr (ed.), exhibition catalogue, *Marcel Duchamp and the Avantgarde seit 1950*, Cologne, 1988.

Travels of a Cliché: On paraphrases of the *Mona Lisa*, see M. R. Storey, *Mona Lisa*, New York, 1980; the Duisberg catalogue. The *Spiegel* article appeared 7 October 1959. The review *Bizarre*, with texts by J. Margat and others, dates from May 1959,