



# The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade (The use-value of art)

curated by Stephen Wright

## ART'S BROKEN PROMISES

By and large, when artworlders talk about what might be broadly described as art's 'use value,' they're bluffing. Anyone who believes that art, in any conventional sense of the term, by 'questioning,' 'investigating,' or otherwise 'depicting' some socio-political issue, actually empowers anyone to do anything about it, is actively engaged in self-delusion. Yet art continues to make such promises — using its institutions to lend them not only a largely unchallenged semblance of truth, but all the trustworthiness of convention — only to immediately break them. Why? Is it because art is unable to do away with its romantic underpinnings, except by abandoning itself to all-out cynicism? More likely, it is because art remains caught in an essentially representational paradigm, protected from the real, which allows the symbolic transgressions of the artworld to be confused with the real-life political activism that occurs in the judicial, penal and civil spheres of society. In and of themselves, of course, such 'picture politics' are not void of use-value: for the artworld elite that likes that sort of thing, the concentrated, composed and self-reflective works one finds in museums have a contemplative value that is far from negligible, in terms of refining perceptive awareness or stimulating sense-based cognition. But all that falls far short of what art implicitly leads us to expect — which is what makes our relationship to art one of constantly renewed, constantly dashed hopes.

## THAT'S JUST ART!

Should we resign ourselves to this state of affairs and seek to curate convincing exhibitions, bringing together an array of artworks whose contemplative use-value can be cogently laid out in an accompanying essay? After all, isn't that what the artworld is all about? Or is it possible to envisage dealing with use-value in substantively different terms? In terms literally reversing the dominant mode of twentieth-century artistic production? By thinking of art in terms of its specific means (its tools) rather than its specific ends (artworks)? What could be more normal than artists producing artworks?



AAA, Corp, *Transmission Tour, The wages of fear #01*, 1999, sound and radio mobile studio



After all, they're just doing their job, and there seems to be no stopping them. And besides, who would want to stop them? So they go on and on making art — adding to the constantly growing category of objects obeying that description. What is more unusual, and far more interesting, is when artists don't do art; or, at any rate, when they don't claim that whatever it is they are doing is, in fact, art. When they recycle their artistic skills, perceptions and habits back into the general symbolic economy of the real.

## BEYOND CONTEMPLATIVE VALUE: OPERATIVE VALUE

In contexts often far removed from art-specific spaces and time, the past few years have witnessed the emergence of a broad range of such practices, which, in spite of certain affinities and indeed, at times, of undeniable kinship, can only be described as art-related rather than art-specific activities, often laying no particular claim to art status. In many cases, these forms of symbolic production, implicitly questioning and even shattering the borders of art, live up to art's promises far more effectively than those practices upheld and underwritten by current artistic conventions. Yet the status of these art-related activities, has never been the object of sustained scrutiny (they are usually written off as conceptual leftovers of the seventies). Even contemporary aesthetic philosophy tends to invoke them as evidence only insofar as they are predefined as not art, in a hasty endeavor to again secure the borderlines of what is conventionally known as art.

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- Artists and collectives:
- AAA.Corp (Saint Etienne)
- The Atlas Group (Beirut)
- Bureau d'études (Paris)
- Critical Art Ensemble (New York)
- Grupo de Arte Callejero (Buenos Aires)
- xurban (Istanbul)
- The Yes men (Paris)

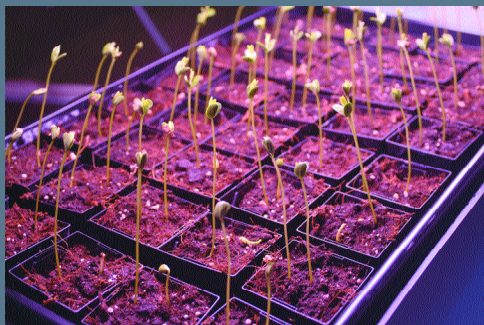
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xurban, from the *containment contained* project, 2003, digital image



Critical Art Ensemble, *Molecular Invasion*, 2002, installation view



The Yes men, *Try 'em*, 2003, deck of 52 playing cards



Atlas Group, *No, Illness Is Neither Here Nor There or Livre d'Or* \_ plate 57, 1975-1988 / 2004, color print, 10 X 12 inches

## ART-RELATED PRACTICE

There is, of course, a context for this shake-up of the status of art and the artist, bequeathed by the twentieth century: artistic activity itself is developing on a massive scale and in a mind-boggling variety of forms, and the production of meaning, form and knowledge is no longer the exclusive preserve of professionals of expression. One finds artistic skills and competencies at work in a variety of areas far beyond the confines of the symbolic economy of the art world, and the practices which they inform are in many cases never designated and domesticated as art. The fact that this sort of art-related creativity seeks no particular validation from the art world, that it pays scant heed to the values and conventions underpinning it, should by no means inhibit us from charting its genealogy and identifying its inherent rationality. And yet, aesthetic philosophy, persisting as it does in construing art as an enigma to be deciphered, as an object begging interpretation, seems decidedly ill-equipped to theorize art in this expanded sense. Beyond both the well-worn logic of appropriation, which consists of recuperating as art all description of objects and activities not intended as such; and beyond the converse, though symmetrical logic consisting of using artistic practices — those, in other words, initiated and managed by artists — to stake out and claim new territories for art, it seems worth pursuing use-value in this particular direction though on the basis of an extraterritoriality and reciprocity that prefigure an unforeseen future for it.

## THE FUTURE OF THE RECIPROCAL READYMADE

Anchoring this approach in art-historical terms may help. In a late text, Marcel Duchamp set out to distinguish several different types of readymades. Of particular interest here is the genre which he punningly describes as 'reciprocal readymades.' Anxious, Duchamp claimed, "to emphasize the fundamental antinomy between art and the readymade," he defined this radically new, yet subsequently neglected genre through an example: "Use a Rembrandt as an ironing-board." More than just a quip to be taken at face value, or a facetious mockery of use-value, Duchamp points to the symbolic potential of recycling art — and artistic tools and competencies — into the general symbolic economy of life (as opposed to the standard readymade, which recycles the real into art). The point, and starting point, of this project is to reactivate this unacknowledged genre of artistic activity.

## ART WITHOUT ARTISTS, WITHOUT ARTWORKS, AND WITHOUT AN ARTWORLD

So what happens when art crops up in the everyday, not to aestheticize it, but to inform it? When art appears not in terms of its specific ends (artworks) but in terms of its specific means (competencies)? Well, for one thing, it has an exceedingly low coefficient of artistic visibility: we see something, but not as art. For without the validating framework of the artworld, art cannot be recognized as such, which is one reason why it is from time to time useful to reterritorialize and assemble it in an art-specific space. In one way or another, all the collectives in this project confront a common operative paradox: though informed by art-related skills, their work suffers from — or, should we say, enjoys — impaired visibility as art. Yet this impaired visibility may well be inversely proportional to the work's political efficacy: since it is not partitioned off as 'art,' that is, as 'just art,' it remains free to deploy all its symbolic force in lending enhanced visibility and legibility to social processes of all kinds. It is a form of stealth art, infiltrating spheres of world-making beyond the scope of work operating unambiguously under the banner of art. The art-related practitioners involved in this project have all sought to circumvent the reputation-based economy of the artworld, founded on individual names, and have chosen to engage in collaborative action; they use their skills to generate perception and produce reality-estranging configurations outside the artworld. As the wide range of tools developed by these collectives show, this has nothing to do with a ban on images; art has no reason to renounce representation, a tool it has done much to forge and to hone over its long history. The question is the use to which such tools are put, in what context, and by whom: tools whose use-value is revealed as they are taken up and put to work.

## ART AS A WALK-IN TOOLBOX

A project focusing on the use-value of art must closely examine its own use-value. How can it channel art-related skills and perceptions in such a way that they empower rather than impress people? In other words, what should a project that sees art as a latent activity, rather than as an object or a process, physically look like? More like a walk-in toolbox than an exhibition; like an open toolbox, full of the ways and means of world-making.