

-placed

In the 1910s, art changed forever. I think of two names in particular, Kasimir Malevich and Marcel Duchamp. One started painting white squares on white backgrounds. The other put a bicycle wheel on a stool, nailed a coat-rack to his floor and called it “Trap,” and submitted an inverted urinal to an art-show. You can immediately see the consequences. What counts as materials for art are massively extended: it’s not just oil on canvas or bronzes anymore, but rubber and wood. You don’t have to even make it yourself, for found and manufactured objects may be just as viable as things allegedly created from scratch. The forms of art are themselves no more inherently valuable than industrial forms, and can be put to work just as mass-produced household furniture is put to work. Duchamp himself will later note the “readymade” nature of canvas, oils and subjects. They’re as prepackaged and predigested as any toilet bowl. Any sort of technique and technology might do to turn stuff into art (or, of course, art into stuff). Art isn’t linked to any image in particular; indeed, it can be utterly voided of images. Portraits may be nice, but there’s possibly nothing of art about them, even if you try to mess them up by using prostitutes as models, or dissolving the representation into interlocking planes. There’s no particular place where art has to be made: outside of the studio, you might find it in private apartments or public toilets. Neither is there anywhere in particular where art has to be seen, whether in galleries or museums. In fact, you don’t even have to *see* the art at all; art is not necessarily a visual medium, or, alternatively, art goes way beyond phenomenal vision. As for the makers of art, they don’t have to be or do anything very much in particular. If they’re geniuses — and nothing’s less certain — it’s not because they have such vivid imaginations, or deep historical erudition, or any committed beliefs about the ineffable value of art. Artists don’t have to be properly trained in properly ratified educational institutions. They can come from anywhere. Art doesn’t have to be pretty; it doesn’t have to have a message; it doesn’t even have to be art. The point is rather to “do whatever,” as the critic Thierry de Duve puts it, “*n’importe quoi.*”

So art becomes an ontological problem. Is “art” just a name for moves in a very circumscribed social game? Or is “art” something more like a name for unprecedented operations on diverse materials? Or something else altogether? The problem isn’t just a problem for critics and the market, but for and in art itself. Artworks start to become experimental singularities that pose the problem in their own way, and present themselves as “definitively unfinished” solutions to their own problems (again, a Duchampian phrase). They can start drawing connections between hitherto separate zones, or mess with existing connections. They have to *expose* themselves, as a number of commentators have put it, like photographs are exposed, to light, to attention, to the stellar ice of dead planets. Like celebrities, some artworks now die of overexposure, some die from being underexposed.

Yet it all takes place in a very precarious place. The philosopher Slavoj Žižek has pointed out that while Malevich accomplished the identification of the *place* of art per se, that is, the void at its heart, what Duchamp did was to show that art was the pure gesture of *placement* itself. The place of art is nothing and nowhere in particular, and what is placed doesn’t have to be anything in particular. Nonetheless, in its self-exposure of its minimal conditions, art also has to do something more. As Wallace Stevens put it in his well-known “Anecdote of the Jar”:

I place a jar in Tennessee,
 And round it was, upon a hill.
 It made the slovenly wilderness
 Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
 And sprawled around, no longer wild.
 The jar was round upon the ground
 And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.

The jar was gray and bare.
 It did not give of bird or bush,
 Like nothing else in Tennessee.

Placement and place: gestures in the wilderness of art. If contemporary art takes place in the wilderness, the most interesting artworks continue to explore its rocks and crevices, seeking details and exits previously unglimped. The only trouble is that it has to expose something new as it does so, and that just gets harder and harder. These days, that hill is crowded with jars.

In his book *Theory of the Subject*, Alain Badiou coins two neologisms of pertinence here: *esplace* and *horlieu*. The word “esplace” is a contraction of “the space of placement” [*espace de placement*]; it designates a kind of structural investment. The word “horlieu” is a portmanteau word combining “hors” [outside] and “lieu” [place]; it denominates a kind of a-structural topology. Let me (mis)translate these words as *splace* and *outland*. In “splace,” you should at least hear “place,” “splice,” and “splay”; in “outland,” resonances of the “outlaw” and the “outlandish.” I want to suggest that, in this Ocular Lab show at Trinity College University of Melbourne, we can encounter works that stage a struggle between outland and splace. It’s not just that Trinity provides the splace for the works, nor that Ocular Lab is simply establishing itself like an outland in this splace. This struggle takes place both “within” and “between” the works and their site.

So we find the Manson Family collaged on the moon, the painted faces of Egyptian boys supporting the Trinity dormitories, a video of a banner bearing the image of Jacques-Louis David’s Buddha-faced revolutionary martyr Marat, rowers going nowhere fast, an unexpected suprematist “V” (for Victory?), the apparition of supernumerary or missing books, Beckettian endgaming, and the intricate decorativeness of linked rats’ paws, among much else. Think of all the different operations of displacement, misplacement (in the double sense of being wrongly-placed and temporarily unlocatable or lost), and replacement put into play.

Above all, think of what they've done to your place.

Justin Clemens is the author of *The Mundiad* (Blackinc 2004). He teaches psychoanalysis at Deakin University and is the art-critic for *The Monthly*.