WHENEVER PICABIA MENTIONED THE INKBLOT HE SIGNED, HE NEVER FAILED TO POINT OUT THE INIMITABILITY OF SUCH SPLATTERS

PRECURSORS
Gustave Flaubert Dictionary of Received Ideas, 1850–80//026
Anon. The Richard Mutt Case, 1917//026
Louis Aragon The Challenge to Painting, 1930//027
Raoul Hausmann Photomontage, 1931//029
André Breton and Paul Éluard The Object, 1938//031
Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman Directions for the Use of Détournement, 1956//035
Marcel Duchamp Apropos of ‘Readymades’, 1961//040
Andy Warhol Interview with Gene R. Swenson, 1963//041
Jeff Wall On Dan Graham’s Homes for America (1966–67), 1988//043
Gustave Flaubert
Dictionary of Received Ideas//1850–80

ANTOQUES
Are always modern fakes. [...]  

ART  
Leads to the workhouse. What use is it since machines can make things better and quicker?  

ARTISTS
All charlatans. Praise their disinterestedness [...]  
What artists do can't be called work. [...]  

AUTHORS
One should 'know a few authors': no need to know their names.

Louis Aragon
The Challenge to Painting//1930

[...] One can imagine a time when the problems of painting, those for example that made for the success of Cézannism, will seem as strange and as ancient as the prosodic torments of poets may appear now. One can imagine a time when the painters who no longer mix their own colours will find it infantile and unworthy to apply the paint themselves and will no longer consider the personal touch, which today still constitutes the value of their canvases, to possess anything more than the documentary interest of a manuscript or autograph. One can imagine a time when painters will no longer even have their colour applied by others and will no longer draw. Collage offers us a foretaste of this time. It is certain that writing is moving in the same direction. This brooks no discussion. In the Dada period, and actually a bit earlier, this insight about the future of painting comes to light quite precisely thanks to two spirits even more different from each other than Braque and Picasso – Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia. And an individual who passed for an eccentric before mysteriously disappearing: the now legendary [boxer and poet] Arthur Cravan, deserter from seventeen countries. The process of painting then was taken so far, the negation of painting so violently declared, that the impossibility of painting imposed itself on the painters. It is perhaps vexing that the sterilizing influence (and here this word is meant in the best sense) of Marcel Duchamp did not purely and simply put an end to painting, instead of applying itself with its utmost rigour against Duchamp himself: but that is what happened. Nevertheless, the example of Duchamp, this silence irritating to those who speak, has made an entire generation ill at ease and perhaps has shamed many canvases which would otherwise have been politely painted. What is certain is that on the day following Cubism's re-creation of the beautiful, a beautiful as special and as defined as its predecessors, Duchamp and Picabia, having watched that crystallization appear before their eyes, having considered the unwavering mechanism of taste, will assault a fundamental element of art, and particularly of painting, by putting personality on trial. The significant stages of this trial: Duchamp adorning the Mona Lisa with a moustache and signing it; Cravan signing a urinal; Picabia signing an inkblot and titling it the Sainte Vierge (Blessed Virgin). To me these are the logical consequences of the initial gesture of collage. What is now maintained, is on the one hand, the negation of technique, as in collage, as well as of the 'technical personality': the painter, if we can still call him that, is no longer bound to his canvas by a mysterious physical

Anon.
The Richard Mutt Case//1917

They say any artist paying six dollars may exhibit.  
Mr Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion this article disappeared and never was exhibited.  
What were the grounds for refusing Mr Mutt’s fountain:  
1. Some contended it was immoral, vulgar.  
2. Others, it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing.  
Now Mr Mutt’s fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bath tub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see every day in plumbers’ show windows.  
Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.  
As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges.

Anonymous article referring to Marcel Duchamp's urinal readymade Fountain (1917) as displayed, signed 'R. Mutt', at the Exhibition of Independent Artists, New York, 1917; The Blind Man, no. 2 (New York, May 1917). Written by either Beatrice Wood, H.P. Roché or Duchamp, or collaboratively.
relationship analogous to procreation. And from these negations an affirmative idea has emerged which has been called 'the personality of choice'. A manufactured object can equally well be incorporated into a painting, it can constitute the painting in itself. An electric lamp becomes for Picabia a young girl. We see that here painters are truly beginning to use objects as words. The new magicians have reinvented incantation. And for those who continue to paint, all sentimentiality concerning material has now been abandoned. To Picabia it doesn't matter who spreads the enamel. As for Duchamp, he has just invented a system for playing roulette, and his last work will be a limited edition 'plate' for the exploitation of this system, an engraved certificate which is a collage containing the author's photograph.

To be sure, whenever Picabia mentioned the inkblot he signed, he never failed to point out the inimitability of such splatters. He congratulated himself that his inkblot was more difficult to copy than a Renoir. In this way such undertakings reveal themselves as an essential critique of painting from its origins to our own times. The Cubists as well had collided with the inimitable but had thought they could tame it. The monster, all at once, claimed sole residence in its cage. [...] Words that express evil are destined to take on a utilitarian significance. Ideas improve. The meaning of words takes part in this.

Plagiarism is necessary. Progress involves it. It adheres closely to an author's words, makes use of his expressions, erases a false idea, replaces it by a correct one.

To be well made, a maxim does not need to be corrected. It needs to be developed.

For me, these phrases of Isidore Ducasse contain all the morality of expression. For everyone, the morality of collage. [...] Louis Aragon, extract from 'La peinture au défi', preface to catalogue of collage exhibition, Galerie Goemans, Paris (March 1930); trans. Michael Palmer, in Pontus Hultén, ed., The Surrealists Look at Art (Venice, California: The Lapis Press, 1990) 55-7: 63 [footnotes not included].

Raoul Hausmann
Photomontage/1931

In the battle of opinions, it is often claimed that photomontage is practicable in only two forms: political propaganda and commercial advertising. The first photomonteurs, the Dadaists, began from a point of view incontestable for them: that the painting of the war period, post-futurist Expressionism, had failed because it was non-representational and it lacked convictions; and that not only painting but all the arts and their techniques required a revolutionary transformation in order to remain relevant to the life of their times. The members of the Club Dada, who all held more or less left-wing political views, were naturally not interested in setting up new aesthetic rules for art-making. On the contrary, they at first had almost no interest in art, but were all the more concerned with giving materially new forms of expression to new contents. Dada, which was a kind of cultural criticism, stopped at nothing. It is a fact that many of the early photomontages attacked the political events of the day with biting sarcasm. But just as revolutionary as the content of photomontage was its form – photography and printed texts combined and transformed into a kind of static film. The Dadaists, who had 'invented' the static, the simultaneous, and the purely phonetic poem, applied these same principles to pictorial expression. They were the first to use the material of photography to combine heterogeneous, often contradictory structures, figurative and spatial, into a new whole that was in effect a mirror image wrenched from the chaos of war and revolution, as new to the eye as it was to the mind. And they knew that great propagandistic power inhered in their method, and that contemporary life was not courageous enough to develop and absorb it.

Things have changed a great deal since then. The current exhibition 'Fotomontage', Berlin, 1931] shows the importance of photomontage as a means of propaganda in Russia. And every film programme – be it [the musical] The Melody of the World, [the comedy of] Chaplin, Buster Keaton, [the working-class drama] Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness, or [the documentary] Africa Speaks – proves that the business world has largely recognized the value of this propagandistic effect. The advertisements for these films are unimaginable without photomontage, as though it were an unwritten law.

Today, however, some people argue that in our period of 'new objectivity', photomontage is already outdated and unlikely to develop further. One could make the reply that photography is even older, and that nevertheless there are always new men who, through their photographic lenses, find new visual
approaches to the world surrounding us. The number of modern photographers is large and growing daily, and no one would think of calling Renger-Patzsch’s 'objective' photography outdated because of Sander’s 'exact' photography, or of pronouncing the styles of Lerski or Berntzik more modern or less modern.

The realm of photography, silent film and photomontage lends itself to as many possibilities as there are changes in the environment, its social structure, and resultant psychological superstructures; and the environment is changing every day. Photomontage has not reached the end of its development any more than silent film has. The formal means of both media need to be disciplined, and their respective realms of expression need sifting and reviewing.

If photomontage in its primitive form was an explosion of viewpoints and a whirling confusion of picture planes more radical in its complexity than futuristic painting, it has since undergone an evolution one could call constructive. There has been a general recognition of the great versatility of the optical element in pictorial expression. Photomontage in particular, with its opposing structures and dimensions (such as rough versus smooth, aerial view versus close up, perspective versus flat plane), allows the greatest technical diversity or the clearest working out of the dialectical problems of form. Over time the technique of photomontage has undergone considerable simplification, forced upon it by the opportunities for application that spontaneously presented themselves. As I mentioned previously, these applications are primarily those of political or commercial propaganda. The necessity for clarity in political and commercial slogans will influence photomontage to abandon more and more its initial individualistic playfulness. The ability to weigh and balance the most violent oppositions – in short, the dialectical form-dynamics that are inherent in photomontage – will assure it a long survival and ample opportunities for development.

In the photomontage of the future, the exactness of the material, the clear particularity of objects and the precision of plastic concepts will play the greatest role, despite or because of their mutual juxtaposition. A new form worth mentioning is statistical photomontage – apparently no one has thought of it yet. One might say that like photography and the silent film, photomontage can contribute a great deal to the education of our vision, to our knowledge of optical, psychological and social structures; it can do so thanks to the clarity of its means, in which content and form, meaning and design, become one.


André Breton and Paul Éluard
The Object/1938

Object. Readymades and assisted readymades, objects chosen or composed, beginning in 1914, by Marcel Duchamp, constituting the first surrealist objects.

In 1924, in the Introduction to the Discourse on the Slightness of Reality, André Breton proposed to fabricate and put in circulation ‘certain of those objects one perceives only in dreams’ (oneiric object).

In 1930, Salvador Dalí constructs and defines an object with symbolic functioning (object which lends itself to a minimum of mechanical functioning and which is based on the phantasms and representations susceptible to being provoked by the realization of unconscious acts).

Objects with symbolic functionings were envisaged following the mobile and the silent objects: Giacometti’s suspended ball which united all the essential principles of the preceding definition, but still retained the methods proper to sculpture.

On the passage of Surrealism, a fundamental crisis of the object was produced. Only the very attentive examination of numerous speculations which this object has publicly occasioned can permit the grasp, in all its import, of the actual temptation of Surrealism (real and virtual object, phantom object, interpreted object, incorporated object, being object, etc.).

Similarly, Surrealism has attracted attention to diverse categories of objects existing outside of it: natural object, perturbed object, found object, mathematical object, involuntary object, etc.

A masterpiece for seven euros and twenty centimes. Yes, for that modest sum one can purchase the German edition of montaged photographs and epigrams compiled by Brecht during the second World War and first published in 1955. [...] We expect a masterpiece to be utterly original. Nothing, it is true, can compare to Monet's *Water Lilies*. But this work of Brecht's is almost entirely made up of quotations cut out from newspapers between 1933 and 1945. It is simply a montage of historical documents. In this sense, it implies a break with the very notion of the artwork as something closed in upon itself – of the work as synthesis. Contrary to the productions of traditional art, 'distant from each other because of their perfection', this corresponds – to borrow Walter Benjamin's terms in *One Way Street* (1928) – to a movement of analysis and not synthesis. The dominant content here is documentary, in other words, historical material in which 'forms stand out' and never merge into each other, are never closed.

We expect a masterpiece to be finished. It never occurs to anyone that there might be a missing snake in the *Laocoon*, a missing person in Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, or a missing light source in Georges de la Tour's candlelit *Madeleine*. But Brecht's work, masterly as it is, has this unfinished quality, which is inherent in the montage process that made it. Because a montage can always be assembled differently, it 'renounces all eternity' – as Benjamin indeed put it – and is therefore constantly waiting for something like an infinite reworking. This is true in practical terms as well as theoretically. First of all, the *Kriegsfibel* is merely an iconographic exsanguine of the 'work diary' (*Arbeitsjournal*) that Brecht began to keep when he was in exile, as of 1933. Here, autobiographical fragments, poems, theatre sketches and philosophical notes coexist in a montage of texts and images that is just as disorienting as the *Documents* assembled by Georges Bataille or Aby Warburg's *Bilderatlas*.

The other reason for the unfinished quality is that in order to make his *War Primer* public Brecht had to cut some of its more 'surreal' images, such as the plate that brings together an old tire, a false leg, an umbrella, two crutches, a few pomegranates – *Granatapfel* ('grape apples') in German – and a coffee grinder [images reinstated in a 1994 re-edition]. There is always something you can add to a list such as this one. The more one explores the Bertolt-Brecht-Archiv in Berlin, the more connections one finds with other images collected by Brecht and his collaborators on this project, the photographer Ruth Berlau, thus multiplying the attractive powers of the images (this question is linked to

Eisenstein's 'montage of attractions' but also to the 'theatre of attractions' evoked, among others, by Brecht's friend Tretjakov). For example, there is the way in which the 'weeper of Singapore' (*Kriegsfibel*, plate 39) in the American bombing raids of 1941 might enable the playwright to envisage the gestures of his future character Mother Courage – the conflation of lament and curse.

We expect a masterpiece to be silent: the grandeur of the sublime goes hand in hand with the feeling of the unsayable. Monet's water lilies do not need to state anything to take our breath away; it is impossible to imagine George de la Tour's Magdalene as a gossip; the open mouths of the *Laocoon* utter only a stony silence. And Brecht, modern as he may have been, here returns to a form recalling phylacteries, long predating the autonomous artwork. Beneath the images he places short texts that, as one soon realizes, have nothing in common with simple captions. Rather, with their white letters against a black background, they evoke most of all the story-boards of silent films or, more probably still, the text projections or commentary-banners of Brechtian epic theatre.

These are the epigrams, the lyrical quatrains for which Brecht would forge the resolutely novel concept of 'photo-epigrams'. But at the same time he knew very well that he was re-enacting an immemorial tradition. The epigram comes from the laconic poetry inscribed on the tombs of Classical Greeks and Romans, but its conciseness has transported it from the domain of grief to the inverse realms of satire and political critique. In the eighteenth century, Herder appealed to an epigrammatic practice for the articulation of historical narrative itself. Finally, one knows that Brecht had been meticulously informed by Benjamin on the poetic strategies of baroque allegory and on the fact that history – with its wars, disasters, griefs – forms the most essential content of *Trauerspiel* ['tragedy; literal trans. 'mourning play'].

By this means, Brecht was able to locate lyricism where it is not normally encountered: amidst assemblages of the most barren historical documentation, even the most unsparing – aerial photographs of bombarded cities; metal-workers making weapons; the close-ups of Goebbels, Goering or Hitler; women under machine-gun fire not knowing how to protect their prams; prisoners behind barbed wire (in this image one recognizes the playwright Lion Feuchtwanger, Brecht's friend); resistance fighters shot; military graves; the defeated starving; victors with no remorse ... The contrast created by this *documentary lyricism* singularly modifies the current idea we have of the famous Brechtian 'distanciation'. We are mistaken when we want to separate at all costs *formula* and *pathos*, that is to say form and intensity or emotion. Brecht himself admitted this without hesitation: 'Emotions governed by our understanding must nevertheless be integrated and used just as they are, in their state of disorder [...] by the artist. Assuredly, to integrate and use them is already to state that our..."
understanding turns them into all kinds of provisional and experimental things' ['Art and Politics', 1933–38]. This is the same experimental lyricism based upon documentary montage that one finds much later on in the novels of W.G. Sebald, in Gerhard Richter’s Atlas, or the films of Santiago Álvarez, Artavazd Peleshian, Jean-Luc Godard. [...] 

1 Kriegsfibel, plate 39, shows a Second World War reportage photograph of an agonized woman in Singapore amongst the carnage of a bombing raid, with the source’s headline [in English] above: ‘Singapore Laments’. Beneath is the text [in German]: ‘O cry upon cry of sorrow, O voice / Of victims and killers following orders / The son of the sky needs Singapore / But your son, woman, no one needs as you.’


Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman
Directions for the Use of Détournement/1956

[...] We can first of all define two main categories of détourned elements, without considering whether or not their being brought together is accompanied by corrections introduced in the originals. These are minor détournements and deceptive détournements. Minor détournement is the détournement of an element which has no importance in itself and which thus draws all its meaning from the new context in which it has been placed. For example, a press clipping, a neutral phrase, a commonplace photograph.

Deceptive détournement, which is also termed premonitory proposition détournement, is, in contrast, the détournement of an intrinsically significant element, which derives a different scope from the new context. A slogan of Saint-Just, for example, or a sequence from Eisenstein.

Extended détourned works will thus usually be composed of one or more sequences of deceptive and minor détournements.

Several laws on the use of détournements can now be formulated:

It is the most distant détourned element which contributes most sharply to the overall impression, and not the elements that directly determine the nature of this impression. For example, in a metagraph [poem-collage] relating to the Spanish Civil War the phrase with the most distinctly revolutionary sense is a fragment from a lipstick ad: ‘Pretty lips are red’. In another metagraph (‘The Death of J.H.’), 125 classified ads of bars for sale express a suicide more strikingly than the newspaper articles that recount it.

The distortions introduced in the détourned elements must be as simplified as possible, since the main force of a détournement is directly related to the conscious or vague recollection of the original contexts of the elements. This is well known. Let us simply note that if this dependence on memory implies that one must determine one's public before devising a détournement, this is only a particular case of a general law that governs not only détournement but also any other form of action on the world. The idea of pure, absolute expression is dead; it only temporarily survives in parodic form as long as our other enemies survive.

Détournement is less effective the more it approaches a rational reply. This is the case with a rather large number of Lautréamon’s altered maxims. The more the rational character of the reply is apparent, the more indistinguishable it becomes from the ordinary spirit of repartee, which similarly uses the opponent’s words against him. This is naturally not limited to spoken language.
It was in this connection that we objected to the project of some of our comrades who proposed to détourn an anti-Soviet poster of the fascist organization 'Peace and Liberty' — which proclaimed, amid images of overlapping flags of the Western powers, 'Union makes strength' — by adding onto it a smaller sheet with the phrase 'and coalitions make war'.

**Déjàtourn** by simple reversal is always the most direct and the least effective. Thus, the Black Mass reacts against the construction of an ambiance based on a given metaphysics by constructing an ambiance in the same framework that merely reverses — and thus simultaneously conserves — the values of that metaphysics. Such reversals may nevertheless have a certain progressive aspect. For example, Clemenceau [called 'The Tiger'] could be referred to as 'The Tiger called Clemenceau'.

Of the four laws that have just been set forth, the first is essential and applies universally. The other three are practically applicable only to deceptive détourned elements.

The first visible consequences of a widespread use of détournement, apart from its intrinsic propaganda powers, will be the revival of a multitude of bad books, and thus the extensive (unintended) participation of their unknown authors: an increasingly extensive transformation of sentences or plastic works that happen to be in fashion; and above all an ease of production far surpassing in quantity, variety and quality the automatic writing that has bored us so much.

Not only does détournement lead to the discovery of new aspects of talent but also, clashing head-on with all social and legal conventions, it is bound to appear as a powerful cultural tool in the service of a real class struggle. The cheapness of its products is the heavy artillery that breaks through all the Chinese walls of understanding. It is a real means of proletarian artistic education, the first step towards a literary communism.

Ideas and realizations in the realm of détournement can be multiplied at will. For the moment we will limit ourselves to showing a few concrete possibilities starting from various current sectors of communication — it being understood that these separate sectors are significant only in relation to present-day techniques, and are all tending to merge into superior syntheses with the advance of these techniques.

Apart from the various direct uses of détourned phrases in posters, records or radio broadcasts, the two principal applications of détourned prose are metagraphic writings and, to a lesser degree, the adroit perversion of the classical novel form.

There is not much future in the détournement of complete novels, but during the transitional phase there might be a certain number of undertakings of this sort. Such a détournement gains by being accompanied by illustrations whose relationships to the text are not immediately obvious. In spite of the undeniable difficulties, we believe it would be possible to produce an instructive psychogeographical détournement of George Sand's *Consuelo*, which thus decked out could be relaunched on the literary market disguised under some innocuous title like 'Life in the Suburbs', or even under a title itself détourned, such as 'The Lost Patrol'. (It would be a good idea to re-use in this way many titles of old deteriorated films of which nothing else remains, or of films which continue to stupefy young people in the film clubs.)

Metagraphic writing, no matter how backwards may be the plastic framework in which it is materially situated, presents far richer opportunities for détourning prose, as well as other appropriate objects or images. One can get some idea of this from the project, devised in 1951 but then abandoned for lack of sufficient financial means, which envisaged a pinball machine arranged in such a way that the play of the lights and the more or less predictable trajectories of the balls would form a metagraphic-spatial composition entitled *Thermal sensations and desires of people passing by the gates of the Cluny Museum around an hour after sunset in November*. We have since, of course, come to realize that a situationist-analytic work cannot scientifically advance by way of such projects. The means nevertheless remain suitable for less ambitious goals.

It is obviously in the realm of the cinema that détournement can attain its greatest efficacy, and undoubtedly, for those concerned with this aspect, its greatest beauty.

The powers of film are so extensive, and the absence of coordination of those powers is so glaring, that almost any film that is above the miserable average can provide matter for innumerable polemics among spectators or professional critics. Only the conformism of those people prevents them from discovering features just as appealing and faults just as glaring in the worst films. To cut through this absurd confusion of values, we can observe that Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* is one of the most important films in the history of the cinema because of its wealth of new contributions. On the other hand, it is a racist film and therefore absolutely does not merit being shown in its present form. But its total prohibition could be seen as regrettable from the point of view of the secondary, but potentially worthier, domain of the cinema. It would be better to détourn it as a whole, without necessarily even altering the montage, by adding a soundtrack that made a powerful denunciation of the horrors of imperialist war and of the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, which are continuing in the United States even now.

Such a détournement — a very moderate one — is in the final analysis nothing more than the moral equivalent of the restoration of old paintings in museums. But most films only merit being cut up to compose other works. This
reconversion of pre-existing sequences will obviously be accompanied by other elements, musical or pictorial as well as historical. While the filmic rewriting of history has until now been largely along the lines of Guitry’s burlesque recreations, one could have Robespierre say, before his execution: ‘In spite of so many trials, my experience and the grandeur of my task convinces me that all is well’. If in this case a judicious revival of Greek tragedy serves us in exalting Robespierre, we can conversely imagine a neo-realist sort of sequence, at the counter of a truck-stop bar, for example, with one of the truck-drivers saying seriously to another: ‘Ethics was in the books of the philosophers; we have introduced it into the governing of nations’. One can see that this juxtaposition illuminates Maximilien’s idea, the idea of a dictatorship of the proletariat.

The light of détournement is propagated in a straight line. To the extent that new architecture seems to have to begin with an experimental baroque stage, the architectural complex – which we conceive as the construction of a dynamic environment related to styles of behaviour – will probably détourn existing architectural forms, and in any case will make plastic and emotional use of all sorts of détourned objects: calculatedly arranged cranes or metal scaffolding replacing a defunct sculptural tradition. This is shocking only to the most fanatic admirers of French-style gardens. It is said that in his old age D’Annunzio, that pro-fascist swine, had the prow of a torpedo boat in his park. Leaving aside his patriotic motives, the idea of such a monument is not without a certain charm.

If détournement were extended to urbanistic realizations, not many people would remain unaffected by an exact reconstruction in one city of an entire neighbourhood of another. Life can never be too disorienting: détournements on this level would really make it beautiful.

Titles themselves, as we have already seen, are a basic element of détournement. This follows from two general observations: that all titles are interchangeable and that they have a determinant importance in several genres. All the detective stories in the ‘Série Noire’ are extremely similar, yet merely continually changing the titles suffices to hold a considerable audience. In music a title always exerts a great influence, yet the choice of one is quite arbitrary. Thus it wouldn’t be a bad idea to make a final correction to the title of the ‘Eroica Symphony’ by changing it, for example, to ‘Lenin Symphony’.

The title contributes strongly to a work, but there is an inevitable counteraction of the work on the title. Thus one can make extensive use of specific titles taken from scientific publications (‘Coastal Biology of Temperate Seas’) or military ones (‘Night Combat of Small Infantry Units’), or even of many phrases found in illustrated children’s books (‘Marvellous Landscapes Greet the Voyagers’).

In closing, we should briefly mention some aspects of what we call ultra-détournement, that is, the tendencies for détournement to operate in everyday social life. Gestures and words can be given other meanings, and have been throughout history for various practical reasons. The secret societies of ancient China made use of quite subtle recognition signals encompassing the greater part of social behaviour (the manner of arranging cups; of drinking; quotations of poems interrupted at agreed-on points). The need for a secret language, for passwords, is inseparable from a tendency toward play. Ultimately, any sign or word is susceptible to being converted into something else, even into its opposite. The royalist insurgents of the Vendée, because they bore the disgusting image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, were called the Red Army. In the limited domain of political war vocabulary this expression was completely détourned within a century.

Outside of language, it is possible to use the same methods to détourn clothing, with all its strong emotional connotations. Here again we find the notion of disguise closely linked to play. Finally, when we have got to the stage of constructing situations, the ultimate goal of all our activity, it will be open to everyone to détourn entire situations by deliberately changing this or that determinant condition of them.

The methods that we have briefly dealt with here are presented not as our own invention, but as a generally widespread practice which we propose to systematize.

In itself, the theory of détournement scarcely interests us. But we find it linked to almost all the constructive aspects of the pre-situationist period of transition. Thus its enrichment, through practice, seems necessary.

We will postpone the development of these theses until later.

Guy-Ernest Debord and Gil J. Wolman, ‘Mode d’emploi du détournement’, Les Lèvres nues, no. 8 (Brussels, May 1956) [on the cover of which the article was credited to Louis Aragon and André Breton – an ironic appropriation of their names, indicating that the Situationists were taking on the Surrealists, confronting what they had become with what they once were]; trans. Ken Knabb, in Knabb, ed., Situationist International Anthology (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 8–14.
Marcel Duchamp
Apropos of ‘Readymades’//1961

In 1913 I had the happy idea to fasten a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool and watch it turn.

A few months later I bought a cheap reproduction of a winter evening landscape, which I called ‘Pharmacy’ after adding two small dots, one red and one yellow, in the horizon.

In New York in 1915 I bought at a hardware store a snow shovel on which I wrote ‘in advance of the broken arm’.

It was around that time that the word ‘readymade’ came to mind to designate this form of manifestation.

A point which I want very much to establish is that the choice of these ‘readymades’ was never dictated by aesthetic delection.

This choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste ... in fact a complete anaesthesia.

One important characteristic was the short sentence which I occasionally inscribed on the ‘readymade’.

That sentence, instead of describing the object like a title, was meant to carry the mind of the spectator towards other regions more verbal.

Sometimes I would add a graphic detail of presentation which in order to satisfy my craving for alliterations, would be called ‘readymade aided’.

At another time – wanting to expose the basic antimony between art and readymades – I imagined a ‘reciprocal readymade’: use a Rembrandt as an ironing board!

I realized very soon the danger of repeating indiscriminately this form of expression and decided to limit the production of ‘readymades’ to a small number yearly. I was aware at this time that for the spectator, even more than for the artist, art is a habit-forming drug, and I wanted to protect my ‘readymades’ against such contamination.

Another aspect of the ‘readymade’ is its lack of uniqueness – the replica of a ‘readymade’ delivering the same message; in fact nearly every one of the ‘readymades’ existing today is not an original in the conventional sense. [...]


Andy Warhol
Interview with Gene R. Swenson//1963

Andy Warhol Someone said that Brecht wanted everybody to think alike. I want everybody to think alike. But Brecht wanted to do it through Communism, in a way. Russia is doing it under government. It's happening here all by itself without being under a strict government; so if it's working without trying, why can't it work without being Communists? Everybody looks alike and acts alike, and we're getting more and more that way. I think everybody should be a machine. I think everybody should like everybody.

Gene R. Swenson Is that what Pop art is all about?

Warhol Yes. It's liking things.

Swenson And liking things is like being a machine?

Warhol Yes, because you do the same thing every time. You do it over and over again.

Swenson And you approve of that?

Warhol Yes, because it's all fantasy. It's hard to be creative and it's also hard not to think what you do is creative or hard not to be called creative because everybody is always talking about that and individuality. Everybody's always being creative. And it's so funny when you say things aren't, like the shoe I would draw for an advertisement was called a 'creation' but the drawing of it was not. But I guess I believe in both ways. All these people who aren't very good should be really good. Everybody is too good now, really. Like, how many actors are there? There are millions of actors. They're all pretty good. And how many painters are there? Millions of painters are all pretty good. How can you say one style is better than another? You ought to be able to be an Abstract Expressionist next week, or a Pop artist, or a realist, without feeling you've given up something. I think the artists who aren't very good should become like everybody else so that people would like things that aren't very good. It's already happening. All you have to do is read the magazines and the catalogues. It's this style or that style, this or that image of man – but that really doesn't make any difference. Some artists get left out that way, and why should they?
Swenson Is Pop art a fad?

Warhol Yes, it's a fad, but I don't see what difference it makes. I just heard a rumour that G. quit working, that she's given up art altogether. And everyone is saying how awful it is that A. gave up his style and is doing it in a different way. I don't think so at all. If an artist can't do any more, then he should just quit; and an artist ought to be able to change his style without feeling bad. I heard that Lichtenstein said he might not be painting comic strips a year or two from now — I think that would be so great, to be able to change styles. And I think that's what's going to happen, that's going to be the whole new scene. That's probably one reason I'm using silkscreens now. I think somebody should be able to do all my paintings for me. I haven't been able to make every image clear and simple and the same as the first one. I think it would be so great if more people took up silkscreens so that no one would know whether my picture was mine or someone else's. [...] 

Swenson Why did you start these 'Death' pictures?

Warhol I believe in it. Did you see the Enquirer this week? It had 'The Wreck that Made Cops Cry' — a head cut in half, the arms and hands just lying there. It's sick, but I'm sure it happens all the time. I've met a lot of cops recently. They take pictures of everything, only it's almost impossible to get pictures from them.

Swenson When did you start with the 'Death' series?

Warhol I guess it was the big plane crash picture, the front page of a newspaper: 129 D1E. I was also painting the 'Marilyns'. I realized that everything I was doing must have been Death. It was Christmas or Labor Day — a holiday — and every time you turned on the radio they said something like, '4 million are going to die'. That started it. But when you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn't really have any effect. [...] 


Jeff Wall On Dan Graham's Homes for America (1966–67)/1988

[...] Homes for America is the finest of the group magazine pieces of the late 1960s, all articulating the theme of the defeat of those ideals of rational, critical language by bureaucratic-commercial forms of communication and enforcement. The magazine pieces are structured as small, ironically insignificant defeats for liberationist ideas, as ‘defeatist interventions’ in the mechanisms of ideological domination. They are aimed at disrupting the flow of standardized, falsified representation and language, and inducing a ‘mini-crisis’ for the reader or viewer by means of the inversions they create. [...] Reflected in the provocations and interventions characteristic of 1960s Situationism, in which an unexpected and confrontational gesture interrupts the established rhythm of relationships in a specific context, and induces a form of contestation, paradox or crisis, this approach thereby exposes the forms of authority and domination in the situation, which are normally imperceptible or veiled. The most notable artistic image of this is the unexpected ‘void’ or ‘rupture’ in the seamlessly designed social surface, and conceptualism’s origins are filled with such blanks, erasures, tears and cuts. These gestures interrupt the induced habits of the urban masses, and the interruption theoretically permits social repression (which is the veiled content of habit) to emerge in a kind of hallucination provoked by the work. This liberating hallucination is the objective of the work, and its claim to value. Such Situationist intervention is also related to Pop, but inversely, as is conceptualism: it aggravates Pop irony by means of humour noir, and attempts to elicit a recognition of the terroristic aspects of the normalized environment of images, things, spaces and mechanisms.

Graham’s magazine pieces fuse a Situationist-inspired strategy of the ‘cut’, of détournement, with that of the mimesis of bureaucratic forms of ‘factography’. The interventions designed by him remain primarily concrete, functioning through the dynamics of specific subjects. Conceptualism, in relapsing into ‘radical formalism’, tended to empty the ‘cut’ or intervention of its specific character, thereby absolutizing it as an extreme form of emblematic abstraction. Such interventions are reduced to decorativism, as is the case with many later works by Daniel Buren, for example. Graham uses an actual text — an article, an advertisement, a chart — which constitutes its intervention through a structured difference with the norms of the genre in question. Thus, in these works, a specific social genre, existing functionally, is altered in a prescribed direction aimed at bringing out and making perceptible the underlying historical oppression.
Thus, *Homes for America*s theme, the subjection of the romantic ideal of the harmonious garden suburb to the systems of ‘land development’, is presented in the pseudo-Readymade form of a ‘think-piece’ or popular photo-essay. This format is retained, mimetically, as the means by which the subject-matter is altered and made perceptible in a negative sense. Graham’s approach accepts the existing formalism of culture – its rigidified generic structure – as a first principle, and applies pseudo-Readymade, pseudo-Pop and authentically Situationist strategies to it. The result is formalism intensified to the qualitative crisis point. The work makes its intervention in the context of a formalized emptiness of existing genres, but does not create an antithetical emptiness, a purely abstract or emblematic intervention. In fusing the journalistic attitude which accepts the primacy of subject matter together with the Situationist-conceptualist strategy of interventionism and détournement, the work establishes a discourse in which the subject matter, a critique of Minimalism and Pop via a discussion of the architectural disaster upon which they both depend, can be enlarged to the point of a historical critique of reigning American cultural development. […]


Reiko Tomii

Paper money, as pieces of paper, is worthless, but its theoretical worth becomes real when institutionally underwritten; as such, paper money fuels the financial and economic engine of modern society. Inevitably, it sparks the creative and critical faculties of modern artists. To put it crudely, society sees little harm in what artists do with money, so long as their works innocuously remain in the semiotic empire of images, in the autonomous realm of Art. However, artists with anti-art inclinations tend to violate the boundary between art and life, performing interventional acts in everyday contexts. Should their works trespass into the terrain of criminality, society (or, more precisely, the state) is compelled to strike back.

And courtroom battles over ‘money art’ are not rare. In Japan, Akasegawa Genpei inadvertently achieved notoriety for his *Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident*, in which the artist’s ‘mechanically reproduced’ money (made in 1963) became an object of criminal investigation, indictment and trials (1965–70).1

Judicial views on money art differ from country to country, depending on the laws that govern currency. In a nutshell, the trial surrounding Akasegawa’s *Model 1,000-Yen Note* amounted to a contest between art and the state over the balance between constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression and public welfare. Given the authoritarian nature of the Japanese judiciary system, Akasegawa predictably lost his case in 1967, with his guilty verdict upheld by the Supreme Court in 1970.

For the convicted artist the most pressing issue was no longer the definition of art, because, ironically, this anti-art practitioner had learned to say, with firm conviction, ‘art is what an artist says is art’. Rather, his concern was how to continue his art without losing the biting edge of his critique of ‘civil society’, every corner of which was ‘stained by the state’s power’.

Now that, thanks to the trial, he was equipped with an intimate understanding of money-making, one logical place to start his post-trial work was money. Thus, he created the parodic *Greater Japan Zero-Yen Note (1967)*. He even devised an ingenious strategy of inserting it into everyday life. Through a poster he designed and writings published in magazines, he advertised that he would exchange three actual 100-yen notes for his zero-yen note. His goal was to put ‘real money’ issued by the state out of circulation, by offering his no-value money in exchange for 300 ‘real’ yen. And many people bought into his idea, sending him their money. (To this day he has the bills preserved in a few 30-cm-
high glass jars, together with the post-office cash mailers they were sent in.)

Without doubt, Zero-Yen Note is a funny piece, with its explicit worthlessness (the figure 0 being prominently and repeatedly featured), the artist’s insistence that his money is ‘THE REAL THING’ (as printed in English on its verso), and his quixotic exchange scheme. Still, we short-change ourselves if we focus only on its obvious transgression. The true offence lies in Akasegawa’s proclamation that his work is ‘law-abiding’. The ‘history’ of Zero-Yen Note in his poster puts it this way:

Pulling out wet grapevines
Gutenberg paved the road.
Seashells, with the sea drawn out of them,
Turn into paper, passed through iron.
Throwing a sidelong glance to the tunnel of paper money,
Civilians press on in their battle,
Trampling over Kasumigaseki [the government office district].
In zero they trust.
This law-abiding painting.

Being law-abiding does not necessarily mean being docile before the state’s power. As is the case with ‘law-abiding struggles’ of labour unions, adherence to every regulation in the book can be an effective measure of legal resistance. In fact, parody, working by definition through appropriation, offers a more devastating commentary on its subject than outright opposition.

Greater Japan Zero-Yen Note exemplifies Akasegawa’s manoeuvres to render his money ‘real’ without being really real, thus keeping it absolutely lawless. Above all, the denomination of ‘zero’ invalidates any accusation of ‘counterfeiting’ and ‘imitating’ real bills (both unlawful acts). Then, there is its size. Although incorporating all the requisite elements of currency design – elaborate borders, authentic-looking typefaces, a serial number, the portrait of a historically important person – it is approximately twice the size of real banknotes in Japan. From this telltale sign alone, no one would mistake it for ‘real’ or actually use it.

In addition, two peculiarities on its recto readily signal the parodic nature of the artist’s intervention. For one thing, the portrait (which was most likely borrowed from the actual 500-yen bill) has an empty face, with the caption ‘the real view’. Secondly, the Japanese word honmono (‘the real thing’) is superimposed to mimic the way ‘sample’ (mihon) bills are officially marked for cancellation. Besides, the work is conspicuously imprinted with the title Greater Japan Zero-Yen Note on its recto. In postwar society, not many people would take seriously anything bearing the phrase ‘Greater Japan’, a painful reminder of wartime imperialist Japan. The most incongruous iconography is Akasegawa’s oblique allusion to paper money as printed matter, represented on the verso by Gutenberg and printing-related objects, including a printing press and typesetters’ shelves, among others.

With all the care he took to be law-abiding, Akasegawa could not help making some references to Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident in his Zero-Yen Note. Notice the three zeros in each corner of its recto. This is not a design mistake, where only one zero would suffice, but signifies the deletion of 1’s from the 1,000-yen note. Its serial number, RA5654658R, is directly transferred from Model 1,000-Yen Note. And finally, his ‘law-abiding’ stance is secretly contradicted by four Chinese characters, hidden in the border decoration, that express his honest sentiment, quoting Chairman Mao: zo-han-yu-ri, or ‘rebel with a cause’!

1 For further details on this work, see the author’s essay in Global Conceptualism (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999) 20–22.