

The first ready-mades (1913-17) were not single conceptual or found 'things'; they were composite sculptures made of at least two elements. Examples include a stool paired with a bike wheel, a urinal combined with ink, a snow shovel and text, a ball of twine held between brass plates with screws, an embossed leather cover for a typewriter carefully displayed on a rod. These composite works, however, have been simplified in historical narratives, reduced to their conceptual significance or the space they occupy in our cultural memory. This simplification overlooks some of their still-shimmering complexity. While this might seem like a drawn-out debate for art historians or purists of ready-mades, contemporary artists like Clémentine Adou highlight these blind-spots and demonstrate why they still matter.

One could argue that Duchamp, the consummate illusionist, used ready-mades to divert attention from his long-secret work on *The Large Glass*. While everyone championed his other 'inventions', he was busy borrowing from the older tradition of stained glass. Duchamp seemed to have taken on Walter Benjamin's imperative to "wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it" and applied this principle to art that was typically found in churches¹. Art seems to be so enmeshed with power, it requires a smokescreen like the ready-made—not to save it outright as much as to disguise its true revolutionary intentions behind an already radical façade.

Clémentine Adou's work draws on the ready-made and minimalism. Both use distraction to alter perceptions. Ready-mades divert focus from traditional craftsmanship, while minimalism—though it professes simplicity—distracts from the reality that it is continuous with the neoliberal logics of speculation and investment. Adou's practice plays on this dual illusion. She uses found industrial and processed materials but of a lighter nature such as cardboard, plastic, or aluminum, repurposed or as-is, and adds varnish, paints, and layers to mimic slicker objects. At other times, she intervenes on their structure—folds or opens them—spinning their fated nature as 'trash' into something profoundly transformed and moving.²

To this end, Adou spends a great deal of time scouting her immediate environment—streets, backyards, the walk to the studio—to find discarded objects and overlooked materials that meet her wishes. While she might have an idea of what she wants, the nature of these lucky finds means that formal considerations often have to be improvised on the spot. This wandering becomes a performative act, re-enacting a certain *flânerie* (read: male), which gradually evolves into a fully iconoclastic statement. For example, she might transform a discarded TV box into a faux-monumental sculpture that mimics the grandiosity of Donald Judd or Tony Smith. Each found component is then saved for later from an instinct that it will matter at some point.

Her works frequently feature painted cigarette packs, other kinds of boxes, and broken or disjointed umbrella ribs (all found), along with the recurring motif of the red spot, often plastic clown noses bought in bulk by the artist. These ready-made noses keep us on the edge of our seats. They are funny ha-ha on the surface, especially when used kinetically or redistributed on other sculptures. However, the labor involved—hidden or deceptive—along

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

² Anna C. Chave, 'Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power', *Arts Magazine*, 64.5 (January 1990), pp. 44–63.

with the absence of a truly simple gesture behind them, dulls the comedic edge and turns them into something more sobering. Everything here risks being overlooked or unfairly judged for what it is and isn't. The historical significance of ready-mades and minimalism, combined with the perception that ready-mades are too easy and minimalism too referential, renders this citational practice a little 'cursed'. Citation in art can be a burden, and a form of attention management too—always the work of an illusionist.³ The true illusion, though, lies in the immense effort to stand behind these objects while simultaneously concealing the labor, its stigma, its rationale, or its lack thereof. This curse is harnessed by Adou to bridge these apparently irreconcilable worlds. It allows the artist to be fully present, engaging directly with the materials and their histories, selecting what fits and what doesn't.

We all, in some way, must reconcile the weight of work in our lives with some form of illusion—a satisfaction that never comes.

Minimalism, in this context, can be seen as the ultimate illusion: an unconscious performance, unaware of itself but deeply engaged with its respective object (often male-dominated in its historical context). The repurposed consumer boxes—particularly those of significant size—embody this minimalist unconscious. Adou paints over them with nondescript colors—black, brown, or dark khaki, and occasionally red—and presents them either bare on the floor or hanging on the walls. This presentation forces a contemplation of their transformation: when do these objects transition from their original 'thinginess' into new works of art, and at which point do they start looking comically worse, reverting back to trash? This fragility, where the objects hover between art and waste, mirrors their material vulnerability and conceptual impermanence.⁴ Adou's works, while appearing large and industrial, are often paper-thin, embodying a delicacy that contrasts the otherwise robust forms traditionally celebrated. This duality—where the grandiose is reduced to the fragile—captures a larger struggle within the arts: how to assert presence and voice without being overshadowed or co-opted by dominant paradigms.

Adou's critical flâneurism can be seen as a deliberate response to these imposing structures. Her version of the 'magic' and 'comical' inherent in ready-mades or the 'short-circuit' strategy of minimalism emerges from this performative wandering. Just as Adou finds her materials through walking, her artworks are best appreciated in motion—like scenes in a film or the shifting perspectives in a city. This contrasts sharply with how male minimalists worked, distancing themselves from the making process by delegating production to others with a phone call. Their supposed radicality and theatricality⁵ often masked a retreat into detachment and rather a retirement from emotions. All preparatory acts, she seems to say—walking, thinking, talking, trying—should also be types of emotional readiness, setting the stage for a genuine confrontation with entrenched rhetorics of power and what needs changing. It's a mood, in the philosophical sense of *Stimmung*, that guides an artist, helping gauge when conditions are right and how to manage complex emotions experienced when making art, such as self-doubt, loneliness, or shame, which are often linked to excessive expectations or the trial of seeing an emerging work bear one's name. Fanny Howe's words,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Fried describes minimalism as 'theatrical' because it requires the presence and engagement of the viewer to complete the experience of the artwork. See Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood,' *Artforum*, Summer 1967.

"When being alone is more than you can stand, bend your head to the pavement," strike a chord here.⁶ Adou's method of finding beauty in what others discard is an act of humility and an acknowledgment of the essential elements we cannot exist without—feelings, others, and the immense waste we have accumulated. When the balance between visibility and shame becomes overwhelming, there's a danger of splitting the artist's dual roles as both critic and participant in the dual world of readiness to act and achieve real change.⁷ Acceptance and shame become almost one: accepting existence itself, being visible, taking up space, breathing some of the sky, sleeping in a whole bed, and asking for a full share.

Gianmaria Andreetta, July 2024

⁶ Fanny Howe, "London Rose," in *Selected Poems*, ed. by David St. John (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 91.

⁷ Günther Anders, 'Emotion and Reality', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 10.4 (June 1950), pp. 553–562.