



HYPERTEXTUAL READYMADES (BREAKING UP WITH SYNTAX, TWISTING UP SEMANTICS!): FROM DUCHAMP TO TAGGING SYSTEMS

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RESUMO – A lógica hipertextual, orientada pelo raciocínio não-linear, privilegia certo tipo de navegação cartográfica, menos preocupada com mapas e com a representação do que com desvios aleatórios e estados de peregrinação. Os sistemas de *tagging*, por sua vez, são rótulos livres (Cattuto and Pietronero, 2007), similares a palavras-chave (Steels, 2006; Marlow et al., 2006; Macgregor and McCulloch, 2006; Golder and Huberman, 2005; Smith, 2008, p.20), usados para designar itens de um domínio particular. O *readymade*, termo cunhado pelo francês Marcel Duchamp, opera equação curiosa e similar: objetos triviais são expostos como arte, ao serem rebatizados. Os sistemas de *tagging* são, pois, estruturas hipermediáticas elementares que ligam *tags* particulares (unidades textuais) a qualquer tipo de dado (textos, música e vídeos, por exemplo). Nosso objetivo, neste artigo, é reconhecer nos *readymades* de Duchamp sistemas de *tagging avant la lettre*, que engendram aquilo que nomeamos fraturas simbólicas. Estas fraturas. Responsáveis por provocar certo caos para a linguagem convencional, são analisadas na perspectiva da semiótica peirceana. Assim, um urinol de porcelana deslocado do seu contexto original e nomeado A Fonte propicia a emergência de suturas e finais inauditos. A pesquisa aqui disposta é de orientação arqueológica e tenta desvendar, olhando para as artes, as origens históricas dos sistemas de compartilhamento.

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE – hipermídia, *readymade*, semiótica, *tagging*.

ABSTRACT – Hypertextual logic, oriented by non-linear associative reasoning, favors a certain kind of navigational cartography; one that is less concerned with maps and representation than with random detours and states of wandering. Tagging systems, otherwise, are free form labels (Cattuto and Pietronero, 2007), similar to keywords (Steels, 2006; Marlow et al., 2006; Macgregor and McCulloch, 2006; Golder and Huberman, 2005; Smith, 2008, p.20), used to describe items in a domain. The *readymade*, a term coined by the Frenchman Marcel Duchamp, operates a curious equation: everyday, trivial objects are exposed as works of art. Tagging systems are, therefore, elementary hypermedia structures that connect particular tags (or textual units) to any kind of data (text, images, music and videos, for example). The aim of the paper is to recognize in the *readymades* of Duchamp tagging systems *avant la lettre* that enable what we call symbolic fractures. Such fractures, analyzed from the perspective of Peircean semiotics, imply a sort of chaotic fumbling of conventional language. Thus, a porcelain urinal, displaced from their original context and named *Fontain*, allows for the emergence of unpredictable sutures and endings. The research conducted here is archaeological and attempts to unveil the historical origins of fully shared systems.

KEYWORDS – hypermedia, *readymade*, semiotic, *tagging*.

CATEGORIES AND SUBJECT DESCRIPTORS – E.2 [DATA STORAGE REPRESENTATIONS]: Composite *structures*.

GENERAL TERMS – Experimentation, Languages, Theory.

Introduction

Tagging systems are free form labels (CATTUTO and PIETRONERO, 2007), similar to keywords (STEELS, 2006; MARLOW et al., 2006; MACGREGOR and MCCULLOCH, 2006; GOLDER and HUBERMAN, 2005; SMITH, 2008:20), used to describe items in a domain. In those systems, “vocabularies emerge organically from the tags chosen by individual members” (SEN et al., 2006:1). Such freedom means a revolution: “Rather than enforcing a pre-conceived controlled vocabulary, either by employing professional indexers or forcing authors to tag their articles from an established thesaurus, systems (...) assume that users can create useful results when given absolute freedom” (KIPP and CAMPBELL, 2006:1).

Besides the aforementioned freedom, users of tagging systems have, according to Smith (2008:23-24), four main usability facilitators: 1) tags are simple, “you type a few words, and you're done”



(ibid.); 2) tags are flexible, and can be used to describe all kinds of objects and situations, expressing feelings and even arguments; 3) tags are extensible, meaning your “list of tags can grow as much as you’d like.” (ibid.); 4) tags can be aggregated: “unlike folders, which provide a location for information, tags act as hooks” and “can be used to bring together information across multiple Web sites” (ibid.).

We must, however, point out a difference: some are private tagging systems such as gmail, in which tags are visible only to those who configure them; other systems, although public, retain certain levels of privacy control, and finally there are the “fully shared systems, where all tag applications are visible to all users” (SEN et al, 2006). The latter constitute collaborative tagging, and “has been quickly gaining ground because of its ability to recruit the activity of web users into effectively organizing and sharing vast amounts of information” (CATTUTO and PIETRONERO, 2007).

It is not our concern here to discuss different levels of privacy and their implications; nor the potential problems concerning open tagging systems (CHUANG and HUANG, 2009) and its consequent semantics unpredictability, as some information architecture experts are advocating (MORVILLE, 2006). Our main goal in this work is to devise a history of the systematic practice of applying open verbal descriptions to readymade objects, applying the methods of an archeology. This path does necessarily lead to Marcel Duchamp and his readymades, whose logic is, to some extent, replicated by the use of hypertext tags. To this end we will devote special attention to fully shared systems, in which there is a free flow of information between the individual user and the collective network.

The ready-mades

“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 my mind to designate this form of manifestation”. Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) has briefly described in "Apropos of 'Readymades'", dated 1961 (1973:141) the origins of what was to be known as one of the greatest revolutions in the arts of the twentieth century; and whose proposal, "the



significance of an object depends on its context," still inspires the works of contemporary artists today (Crane, 2009:342).

There are, most importantly, the readymades *avant la lettre*, created before the term was coined, namely "the bicycle wheel he mounted on a wooden stool in 1913, the reproduction of a banal landscape to which he added red and green dots, giving it the name *Pharmacy* in January of 1914, and the metal rack for drying bottles he purchased and put in his studio later in the same year" (Seigel, 1997:118-119).

In his book "The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp," Seigel (1997:4) explains that the term "readymade" was used "to describe the ordinary, often machinemade objects he [Duchamp] began to offer as his work, taking over the word-always in English- from the American clothing industry, and sending the most notorious of them, an ordinary porcelain urinal, mounted on its side and dubbed *Fountain*, to an art exhibit in 1917." According to the words of the renowned art critic Arthur Danto (2008:23), "the urinal is a special readymade by virtue of its association with the act of expelling and with gender, which always had a determining role in the mood of Duchamp's art (...) His goal was not to do a simple prank, as the joke was too intellectual for that. It was, in fact, a refined attempt to raise awareness to the degree in which aesthetic taste defined the essence of art. "

Seigel (1997:118-119) stresses that we must not consider all readymades as a single block of work inspired by the same objectives. In some of his interviews, Duchamp himself (cited in Seigel, 1997:119) highlights the fact that the denomination "readymade" did not exist before 1915, and that during this period *avant la lettre*, the function of such objects was not to question or to rethink artistic practices, but that such objects were set up, instead, merely as "distractions," devoid of the irony characteristic of the "urinal" or "LHOOQ" - which, when read in French, resembles the sound of the phrase "Elle a chaud au cul", which can be translated as "She has fire on the tail" - the now famous image (Figure 2) of the Mona Lisa with a mustache.



Figure 1
Fountain, Marcel Duchamp

The controversy triggered by the works of Duchamp is so significant, that even in recent decades some critics are still discussing whether the readymades should be elevated to the category of art objects or not. Critics such as Diffey (cited Humble, 1982:54) "suggest that the readymades may not belong to art, and that they 'may better be seen as challenges to art.'". Instead of joining this debate, we prefer to illuminate precisely what might generally be responsible for defining the readymades - those which belonged to the early, pre-denomination stage, which were not imbued with any artistic intent; as well as those created with overtly aesthetic purposes: the appropriation of everyday objects, then renamed and removed from their original contexts, now imbued with new meaning, re-signified.

The processes of renaming and contextually shifting objects are mainly semiotic operations, confined to the realm of language. The readymades operate semiotically by being able to, syntactically, reorganize relations between a sign and what it represents - i.e. make an object slide by semiotic categories (Borges and Santos, 2010) and thus gain new meanings. However, before diving into this discussion, we must do some clarification first.



Peircean Semiotics

Given the polysemy that surrounds the use of words such as "semiotics," "sign" and "significance" (NÖTH, 1990: 79), and aware of the scientific requirement of conceptual precision, we present in this section a small overview of some philosophical concepts developed by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), in particular those of icon, index and symbol – a trichotomy by which the relationship between a sign and its object is explained.



Figure 2
L.H.O.O.Q., Marcel Duchamp

As the basis of his semiotics, Peirce developed three phenomenological categories descriptive of what might be perceived as a phenomenon. The philosopher posits, then the existence of the firstness, secondness and thirdness. Firstness concerns “the ideas of freshness, life, freedom” (CP 1.302); secondness, is related to the dyadic opposition of forces, teffort” (CP1.322, 8.330), which is inherent to materiality; thirdness is conceived as a triadic representation (CP 1. 339), the mediation (CP 1.328) between possibilities and facts. We do not intend to describe in detail the



mentioned categories, but we must clarify that the category of thirdness is the one identified with the notion of genuine sign (CP 2.92), being able to mediate, through laws, the transformation of pure possibilities into singular objects, materially manifested (CP. 1328).

The concept of sign, however, is not as simple as it seems. If so, Peirce would not have spent so long creating, by himself, "close to a hundred or more variants" of that definition, as mentioned by Ransdell (cited Santaella 2004a: 11). Santaella (2004b: 13) notes that "the question of the sign is much more subtle than what gross simplifications tend to assume. To penetrate the veins of this subtlety, we should go one step at a time, signaling the way, so that the path is taken carefully and analytically, in order that we might access the synthesis of an understanding that will be always provisional, but still very necessary. "

Evidently, given the specificity of the goals set out in this article, perhaps the "subtlety" of the concept of sign might not be considered in its full extent. However, our only aim is to present an introduction of these concepts. Let us, therefore, proceed to the definition of the Peircean sign. As mentioned earlier, this formulation stems from the appearance of phenomena, that evoke their match in logic, being then understood in the form of language, by the following structure: an initial position, where we find firstness, located in the (1) foundation of the sign, i.e. the phenomenon with the power to produce meaning, to represent, also called representamen; a second position, the locus of secondness, is the home of the (2) object, which manifests itself, always partially, when in relationship with the sign and, finally, where we find that which was called by phenomenology thirdness - is the (3) interpreter, that which replaces the sign, acting as mediation between sign and a new semiosis.

This trio of relationships involves other elements, because the sign actually consists of two objects and three interpreters. Here, discussing these minutiae is unnecessary. It suffices to affirm that "sign-object-interpretant" are technical terms. Every sign already includes the object and interpretant, because what determines the sign is a triadic relation between three elements: the foundation of the sign, its object and its interpretant. These terms indicate the logical positions occupied by each of the elements in semiosis where the foundation of a sign is a first, the object is a second and the interpretant is a third" (SANTAELLA, 2001, p. 43).



It was this ternary articulation that enabled Peirce to develop a complex network of sign classification, always trinitarian. Ten trichotomies were then established, ten divisions of the triadic sign, that when combined result in **66** classes and in the logical possibility of 59,049 types of signs. Evidently, the American philosopher did not explore all of these variants, but the 10 triadic divisions were, however, elaborated. Among all these trichotomies, there are three to which Peirce devoted detailed holdings. The second trichotomy, icon, index and symbol, helps us understand, in terms of language, what exactly is Duchamp transforming via his readymades. Peirce (CP 2299) tells us that “icon has no dynamical [material] connection with the object it represents; it simply happens that its qualities resemble those of that object, and excite analogous sensations in the mind for which it is a likeness. But it really stands unconnected with them. The index is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair, but the interpreting mind has nothing to do with this connection, except remarking it, after it is established. The symbol is connected with its object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind, without which no such connection would exist”. In other words, an icon tries to copy the qualities of its object, an index is materially affected by its object, but a symbol is generally determined by a convention or law (CP 1372).

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We must pay attention to what is most important for the sign to function as a sign “An icon is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence; such as a lead-pencil streak as representing a geometrical line. An index is a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant. Such, for instance, is a piece of mould with a bullet-hole in it as sign of a shot; for without the shot there would have been no hole; but there is a hole there, whether anybody has the sense to attribute it to a shot or not. A symbol is a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant. Such is any utterance of speech which signifies what it does only by virtue of its being understood to have that signification” (CP 2.304).

We should notice that icons, indices and symbols are not exclusive. These categories are ubiquitous in every sign (CP 2294) that is at the same time, 1) iconic, 2) indexical and 3) symbolic. Take photography as an example (CP 4. 447): it is a 1) copy of the visual qualities of an object



which has a 2) material connection - the object touches a physical and chemical apparatus be it film or digital – and the resulting image may, by agreement, acquire the most diverse meanings when it reaches 3) perception. The predominance of iconicity, indexicality and symbolism may, however, vary for each sign. Photography, for instance, is predominantly indexical because its existence requires, necessarily, the contact with the object, unlike a painting or an image created on the computer.

Symbolic fractures - semantic twists

By renaming materials in common use, or by labeling them with new names or verbal expressions, Duchamp operated a symbolic fracture, that is, he subverted the conventions of language, fertilizing unprecedented new meanings to what was worn and deflated by daily usage. In a lecture given at the Museum of Modern Art (New York, 1961, quoted in Danto, 2008:21), the artist reported that the choice of objects for readymades was "based on a reaction of visual indifference and the total absence of good or bad taste ...In fact a complete anesthesia."

The aforementioned apathy, however, gives rise to the alienation characteristic of the artistic universe pointed out by Victor Chklovski (1978). Through a simple yet sophisticated semiotic equation, Duchamp denies order, and in doing so, disrupts the symbolic level of language - the arbitrary naming. Where one reads fountain, one sees a urinal, and thus syntax, wounded, bifurcates into new semantic possibilities. When you type "fountain" on Google Images, there it is - a urinal – a foreign body in the middle of endless fountains. A serial object of industrial production, and thus a copy, or an icon among many, whose name, a symbol, is materially related to its function, indicating a "receiver of urine", and transforms itself. It is no longer a urinal, while being it, and at the same time, it questions the visual image linked to the word "fountain", suggesting perhaps an eschatological hybridization between food and excrement - the water from the drinking fountain. According to Arthur Danto (2008:21), the introduction of non-standard materials in the world of art, initiated by Duchamp, squandered the distinction between good and bad taste, replacing it with the "era of meaning" in which the central question is the work's significance. The revolution was so great that traditional segregation between conventional and



unconventional materials was purged out of contemporary art criticism because of the readymades, according to Danto (ibid.).

Hypertextual readymades

From galleries to networks. Tagging ordinary pre-fabricated objects, and thus giving it new meanings, is now a widespread practice in the digital web. Tagging systems are essentially random hipertextual labels, digital swords in the shape of keywords that are capable of slicing the imperative of collective, the symbolic that is institutionalized, in order to reintroduce the freshness of unpredictable idiosyncrasies. Just like Duchamp, millions of Internet users are appropriating pictures, videos, text, sounds, and renaming them with their individual texts which, especially in the case of fully shared tag systems, are plurally reintroduced by the constant addition/edition of new meanings.

We understand hypertext as a network organization, woven into a mesh of interconnected nodes (Lévy, 2001:44). For some, such an organization is already present in the Library of Alexandria, or at least in the classic encyclopedia, when considering their support tools: dictionaries, glossaries and summaries (ibid; Dias, 1999). To some extent, the contemporary hypertext retrieves and modifies the old interfaces of writing, such as the division into modules - chapters and sections - the selective and non-linear access to text - indexes and abstracts - and connections to other documents – footnotes and references. It is evident, therefore, that hypertextuality foregoes the digital, but seems to find in the liquefaction of the latter (Santaella, 2007) the necessary substrate for a rhizomatic communication (Deleuze and Guattari, 1997), in which multiplicities connect to multiplicities, ad infinitum.

The multiple, by being many, differentiates itself from oneness without exempting it (ibid.). And here we return to the tags, and to a brief and necessary detour. Castells (1999: 44) reminds us that the internet originated from a daring enterprise of the Agency for Advanced Projects Research, from the Department of Defense of the United States, held in the 1960s, whose function was to prevent, upon a nuclear war, the overtaking of the American system of communication by the Soviets." The result was a network architecture that, by design, can not be completely controlled



from any single node and is composed of thousands of autonomous computer networks with numerous ways to connect (...). This network has been appropriated by individuals and groups around the world and with all kinds of goals (...)" (ibid.).

Tagging systems, therefore, follow the very nature of the network that shelter them: the collective is individualized and the individual is collectivized, especially in the case of fully shared tag systems, in an uninterrupted process. From avant-garde art to digital hypertext, the many paths are multiplying. They are getting open to the imponderable realm of infinity. A secondness, matter, then dried up by symbolic relations that limited its fruition possibilities, is revived so that we can see it again in full blossom, and interpreters - other signs - unexpectedly spring, having the power, who knows, of transforming themselves into new symbols, new interpretations, as Duchamp did to his urinal.

Summary and future work

In this article we were able to, albeit briefly, demonstrate how tagging systems, especially fully shared ones, operate according to a systematic practice that has its origins in the early twentieth century avant-garde work of artist Marcel Duchamp – his controversial readymades: the act of tagging, publicly and freely, readymade objects, adding new layers of meaning to them. We explain, in addition, that this is essentially a semiotic operation, in which the sign is challenged in its symbolic level – moreover, Danto (2008:21) places Duchamp's practice at the origin of a specific form of conceptual art. In future works, we will explore case studies looking at photos and video materials that, unlike text, "don't come with much baked-in metadata. Search engines, for example, can typically index the contents of a Web page or other text-based format like an e-mail extract different pieces of metadata, like a title, author, or creation date. Photos and videos message, a PDF document, or a Word document. Depending on the contents of the file, they can don't have the same advantages" (Smith, 2008:182), or, in our view, are less symbolic objects and, therefore, more interesting as case studies of the potential of fully shared tagging systems as semiotic systems.



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