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CASHISM

I. Origins

The origins of CASHISM are submerged in the wake of wrecked fortunes , reputations and lives scattered over three continents by the cunning vengefulness of the most notorious art collector of our times, the Viscount Malcolm Hobbledehoy Ischam-Cheekbroom.

Ischam-Cheekbroom's fortune was built over a lifetime by innovative investments in the armaments industry. His immediate forebears1 had made quite a bit of money in sausage-casings. It was no secret however, that the root of all the Ischam-Cheekbroom money was derived from the stocking Jamaica's plantations with West African slaves in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Our story has little to do with the means by which Sir Malcolm acquired his millions, but only with the fact that he had them. Sir Malcolm was many things to many people2: a dilettante, a poseur, cynic and misanthrope, a lover of crude practical jokes, and a financial genius; but he was also known for his serious side. As an art student in the 1910's he had studied with famous teachers in prestigious schools. Before World War I he counted Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, Gautier-Brezhka and the other Vorticists among his personal friends.

In 1918, as soon as the war ended, he set out on the Grand Tour. He lived in Italy for 3 years, absorbing the experiments of Futurism before heading up to Paris, where he spent another two years horsing around with Tristan Tzara, Andre Breton, Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, Modigliani and kindred ilk.

It appears that Sir Malcolm dedicated his whole life to the fine arts until the age of 30. After 1925 he drifted into the traditional family obsession with money-making: it does not appear that any of the Ischam-Cheekbrooms have ever done anything else. Yet, by that time, he could, with fair justice, lay claim to having a discerning eye for the visual arts. Despite his rapacious mercantilism the poet in him was never entirely killed off, surviving, as with most people, in a more or less embittered form. One cannot

help thinking that he would have been a far happier man as a painter, even a minor one, and that he had been prevented from following his true calling only because he knew there wasn't any money in it. Few persons in the modern world have ever been as perceptive as Ischam-Cheekbroom, of the hideous disparity between the creation of art objects , and their traffic through the venues of commerce.
It is therefore reasonable to surmise that the Viscount Malcolm Hobbledehoy Ischam-Cheekbroom , like many another artiste manqué , tended to invent and to dwell upon scenarios for vengeance. Indeed one finds oneself forced into the conclusion that Sir Malcolm knowingly devoted 40 years of his long life to a grandiose scheme for destroying Art.

From 1925 to 1960 Sir Malcolm won an uncontested reputation for being the only collector in the Euro-American art world who combined a profound intuition for that which is truly great in art, with the pecuniary resources necessary for its acquisition. He was buying up the etchings of William Blake in 1925 5 years before the intelligentsia realized that Blake had been as great a graphic artist as he was a poet. Long before Matisse became popular, Ischam-Cheekbroom was buying his canvases by the score. For as short time, he owned Le Grand Jatte of Seurat before disposing of it at a huge profit. There is even a select group of art historians3 who go so far as to state that the Picasso phenomenon came about primarily through the injection of Cheekbroom money. There may in fact be some truth to this. None of us can ever be entirely free from the feeling that Fine Art makes it mysterious way in the world through the presence of some sort of metaphysical "Oomph", without the necessity of any encouragement from the base and strategies of vulgar tradesmen; all the same, it is entirely possible that even the immortal Picasso needed some sort of boost at the beginning to make it to the top.
We are not finished with our catalogues of the effects of Sir Malcolm's discerning generosity. His acquisitions so catalyzed the markets in Futurist, Dadaist, Surrealist. Cubist and Orphist art that we can truly say that, had it not been for his inexhaustible checkbook and discriminating eye, the works of all of these movements and schools might now be considered nothing more than droll, eccentric curiosities, sometimes to be found hanging in the backrooms of courageous or benighted museums.

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In 1946 the Viscount Malcolm Hobbledehoy Ischam-Cheekbroom sent his agents around the world on a curious mission: to find the worst living painter. It is not a easy matter even to define such an individual. Someone who can't draw at all might be deemed worse than someone who can, but does it very badly. A painter with lots of talent but no technique might be considered better, or worse, than someone with no talent and lots of technique. And so on.

Yet Sir Malcolm had a very clear notion of what he was looking for: a highly skilled mediocrity, someone with too much training, with credentials from the best academies, yet without a spark of inspiration, a man of deplorable taste, sterile and uninventive, whose imagination could not even rise to the level of commercial kitsch. In a letter written to one of his agents in Spain in 1947, Sir Malcolm specified that:

".....his, (or her, as the case may be), work must be such rubbish that sophisticated and vulgar alike will join hands in condemning it. Neither academics, nor intellectuals, nor any other artist, nor dealers, nor the unwashed brainless rabble, nor any rich bastards like myself, would find anything good to say about it. And I want him to be a failure, too! No sales, no commissions, no teaching posts! Just a clerk in a department store - no - worse than that - a ticket collector in the Tube; a bottle washer in some wretched digs in Polynesia or the United States or some such forlorn outpost. He must be reduced to the condition of a subservient lackey without - and I absolutely insist on this point - without having lost any of his ambition! "

It was to be another ten years before Sir Malcolm's agents found someone meeting all of these conditions, several of which may appear to be self-contradictory. For, how is it possible that a person so overtrained in every graphic technique to the point of being able to say precisely nothing, could have failed to obtained a teaching post in any art school of his choosing? The answer, clearly, lay in some corrosive vice, drink, or heroin, lechery, gambling, or some combination of all of these.

While waiting for the right man to surface, the Viscount did not slacken in his customary industry. Together with his princely profits off the Cold War and the nuclear arms race, he increased his assets from 1945 to 1955 by £20,000,000 through wheeling and dealing the Quattrocento.

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There is a curious fascination that clings about the life story of the Hungarian painter Oskar Bánêsh. Among other things, it serves as a useful counter-example to most of the cherished myths that have grown up about the 'agony and ecstasy' of the artists' life.

We restrict our attention to the essential facts: Oskar Bánêsh was born in Budapest in 1900. His family was very highly placed within the Hungarian aristocracy. It was because of this that he was able to avoid participation in World War I, although it did ruin his family's fortunes. Between 1914 and 1918 he was sent to Switzerland to study in an art academy in Lucerne.

Even at this early stage his teachers remarked in him the combination of a totally depleted imagination with a bottomless capacity for work. His studies brought no alteration in this routine formula, and when his family joined up with him in 1918, fleeing Hungary with their jewels sewn into their clothing, Oskar's teachers concurred in recommending to them that, although he should not continue to seek a career in the arts, he was certain to be an outstanding success in any field for which he did show an aptitude.

Poor Oskar! His father was a bully, a tyrant and a fool. The Baron Bánêsh was obsessed with the dream that at least one of his heirs must be a painter, and, since all of his brothers and sisters had either fled the house or been killed in the war, Oskar was all but tortured into a profession for which he showed neither talent nor love. Still very much alive, Oskar was rendered permanently deaf in his left ear from the beating his father gave him when, at the age of 16, he found the courage to state that he really wanted to be an engineer.

Eventually, Oskar Bánêsh was dismissed from the Lucerne academy. His father then bribed an official at the Beaux-Arts in Paris so that he could study for another 4 years. At the age of 22 there was no graphic technique or artistic medium that Oskar had not been trained to use, yet he had not done a single painting that anyone had ever liked. Baron Bánêsh , still obstinately refusing to acknowledge the possibility that his son didn't have any talent, let alone interest, in painting, continued to believe that Oskar's lousy painting was part of an insidious and malicious plot aimed at spiting his benevolent father. A family friend suggested to the Baron in 1923, that his son lacked what they call 'life experience', which is supposed to be good for an artist. He took the idea seriously and enlisted Oskar in the army; not any old army, since they remained stateless: the French Foreign Legion.

Baron Bánêsh ordered his son to send home a sketch once a week. This collection of drawings, which may still be examined in an obscure alcove of the British Museum, is known to art historians as his "Sand Period". Traces of it haunt everything he has ever done. Alas, for it was in those terrible ten years of isolation from civilization in the deserts of North Africa, that Oskar Bánêsh descended into alcoholism and drug addiction. He also fell victim t o several serious illnesses, including the typhus that earned him his discharge from the Legion in 1933.
To appreciate the full dimensions of his personal tragedy, one must understand that none of these horrible sufferings did a thing for his art.
After 1933 , Oskar's family gets lost among the swirling multitudes of Brazil. Free at last, he emigrated to Australia. His portfolio was useless for building a career as an artist, but he was still exceptionally qualified to be an art teacher in Australia's finest academies. However, owing to his mental illnesses, his alcoholism and other corrosive addictions, he could never hold a teaching job for very long. His most stable position was as a drawing instructor at a private arts academy in Nockatunga, Queensland.

As his qualifications for being an art critic exceeded even those for being a teacher, Oskar made a fairly good living from 1940 to 1950 as a critic for several newspapers in Sydney and Melbourne. When he was no longer able to fulfill even these part-time assignments, he became a homeless derelict in the slums of Adelaide, surviving on charity, the welfare system and temporary factory jobs. In all this time , though no gallery would touch him, he never stopped painting.
This was the condition in which Oskar was discovered by the Viscount Malcolm Hobbledehoy Ischam-Cheekbroom's agents in 1955. A psycho-analyst might well be able to build his reputation on a study in depth of the saga of Oskar Bánêsh's life. One must admit that the Baron's self-serving rationalizations contained an element of truth: Oskar's self-destructive urges may have led him to live a failed and ruined life just to get back at his father. If in fact this is the case, then the timely intervention of Sir Malcolm, although it may have gratified his conscious mind, it probably mortified his unconscious. For it was Oskar Bánêsh's destiny to know a brief and dazzling fame, combined with a super-abundance of wealth that would enable him to live in high comfort for the rest of his days4

Sir Malcolm persuaded Oskar to come to England where he was installed in a modern state-of-the-art studio, one of the finest in England, on the grounds of Cheekbroom's grand country estate in Devonshire5 He received good medical care and a liberal expense account. In exchange for all this, Bánêsh was required only to grind out a painting a month for 4 years. Grinding out paintings being the only thing that he knew how to do, both parties acknowledged themselves satisfied with the arrangement.

For the next few years, Sir Malcolm solicited his circle of friends in the fringe aristocracy and persuaded them to include half a dozen or so Bánêsh paintings, with meticulously documented fraudulent pedigrees, among the lots they intended to dispose of by auction.

The Viscount Malcolm Hobbledehoy Ischam-Cheekbroom struck his mortal blow against Art in 1959. A certain Lord Gawkley was selling off his properties in Northumberland, and the accessories of an entire castle, including books, craft items, plate, armor, hangings, furniture, and paintings, went under the hammer at Sotheby's Parke-Bennet. Sir Malcolm showed up on March 23rd, 1959, the fourth day of the sale. A dozen of his confederates had been infiltrated around the audience using various pseudonyms and simple disguises.

The bidding began at 1 P.M. The first Bánêsh painting, 3 cows on a Devonshire meadow, was put on sale at 3 o'clock for a suggested price of 2 guineas. It was knocked down to 1 pound for a representative from a hospital in Brighton looking for something for its emergency ward.

The next Bánêsh painting, a surrealist experiment, pictured an enormous sand dune suspended in mid-air above a munitions factory. Nobody wanted it. A man who turned out to be a representative for the Getty museum was persuaded to take it back with him to Los Angeles for nothing. Yet another of those incorrigible ironies of history: it would soon be apparent to all, that rewards always seem to go to those who already have them.

The third Bánêsh arrived at 4 o'clock, wreathed with the embarrassed apologies of its auctioneers. This was the historic "Cyclops at Trafalgar". It is truly a most hideous painting, a blend of historical genre painting (The Battle of Trafalgar), Symbolism (the eye of the Cyclops), and Surrealism, (the odd juxtaposition of monster and event). It has every painterly vice and but a single virtue: advanced technique.

The Viscount Malcolm Hobbledehoy Ischam-Cheekbroom made the front pages of the world's major newspapers by paying $1,000,000 for it. The skill with which the escalation of

bids had been orchestrated between him and his paid chorus of false art collectors, was astounding.
It is important for us to recall that Sir Malcolm was not just anybodies' rich old art-addled eccentric, but Modern Art made flesh. Forty years of his life had been devoted to establishing his reputation as the one infallible taste-maker in the tiny universe of collectors and curators who decide which artists and what forms of modern art the public should worship. It was just unthinkable that such a person could stake his reputation and the loss of a million dollars on a acquisition of worthless trash.
A month later , a prominent critic of the London Times reminded us that Art never reveals its secrets in an instant. In such matters one must rely on the experts, and Sir Malcolm was an expert's expert.
Indeed , he went on to say , by a minute scrutiny of the details of 'Cyclops at Trafalgar', one starts to recognize faint yet unmistakable traces of genius, things that an ordinary observer would overlook but that only an Ischam-Cheekbroom could spot : that ingenious daub of coloration in the upper corner of the Cyclops' right eye - that 'counterpoint' of lines and textures on the deck's of Lord Nelson's ships - and THAT TRULY INCREDIBLE BLUE - a kind of "mystic's revelation", in the patches of sky between the smoking cannons.....Yes, and well, there really is something to it after all. But, I ask you, is it really worth one million American dollars? I have to conclude, after a long investigation, that it is. You must examine it very closely, you must steep yourself in other Bánêsh masterpieces, some of which are clearly the direct precursors of this great work and, yes, you can see how it would be worth that much. Take that, well, it's a kind of "coif" motif in the hairs of the Cyclops just above the ears. It's certainly "deft". The control of the brush is absolutely superb, I can characterize it in no other way. One just doesn't see that kind of thing being done anymore, it's a distinctive characteristic of the Great Masters. I find it difficult to find exactly the right word for this quality. A special aura seems to hover about it. When you immerse yourself in it, it makes you want to curl up , like a warm puppy, in bliss. Shall we call it a species of "subjective verism"? Perhaps a term like "sacral simplicity"? I would dare say that it is unique in the history of the art of our civilization; there is perhaps something of this quality in the vases of 3rd millenium China... "6
What more is there to say? Oskar Bánêsh was the arts sensation of the 60's. He soon had more commissions than he

could handle, at any price he chose to name. The front doors of his now fashionable London studio stood open day and night so besieged it was by the comings and goings of the rich, the powerful, the glamorous and the elite. It is superfluous to add that Oskar never again traveled in the neighborhood of Devonshire, and never indicated that he had ever had anything to do with the Viscount Malcolm Hobbledehoy Ischam-Cheekbroom.

And it was only a matter of months before artists in every country around the world started claiming that they were, and had always been, disciples of the Bánêsh school. That unmistakable hallmark of the Bánêsh style - overcompetence combined with stupidity - now filled the walls of all the galleries until there was not a square centimetre of space remaining for anything else.

Then the teachers in all the art schools began training their students in the Bánêsh style, and the art critics of all the newspapers and magazines, even the prestigious fine arts journals, began to inspect all painting, past, present and prospective, with the derivative bifocals of the Bánêsh vision. The decade that was to follow would witness the mass production of a certain kind of 'educated' product by the leading art schools, a pitiful freak trained to see the world through Bánêsh eyes and to faithfully reproduce what it saw.

Worse junk has scarcely ever been manufactured in the history of Western Art, which as we know, has experienced more than one lamentable nadir: the allegory painters of Victorian England, the excesses of the family of Annibale Carraci , Russian Socialist Realism, and so on.

So awesome is the glitter of a million dollars on the retina of Mankind's collective brain.

Concurrently with the Bánêsh craze, the market in good art suffered a corresponding decline. It was now possible, for a brief period, to buy, for a few hundred dollars, a Picasso, Chagall or Klee that, only a few years before, had been selling for thousands. Nor were there many buyers to be found: with one curious exception.

Even as he was beating the drum for Bánêsh, Sir Malcolm , in strictest secrecy, was buying up the canvases of the modern masters as fast as they appear on the world market. His agents were everywhere: London, New York, Paris, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro, Sydney, Singapore. Every penny of profit from his thriving armaments speculations was siphoned off into the acquisition of the now despised creators of modern art.

In 1965, Sir Malcolm burst the bubble that he himself had inflated. He did this in the simplest possible way by

dumping 30 Bánêsh paintings on the market at a combined price of £50. As the sand castles of Art crumbled about his feet, the Viscount Malcolm Hobbledehoy Ischam-Cheekbroom snuggled up before the blazing hearth in the huge living room of The Ridings, rocking his precious antique armchair back and forth, an angora quilt about his varicosed legs, his loving basset hound, Reginald, curled up by his feet, cackling the triumphant giggles of the frustrated artist who has at last tasted the sweetness of his revenge.

For Sir Malcolm had ruined Art. All the painters of the present generation were functional incompetents. All the painters of all previous generations were either dead or out of work. All the collectors blinded by the Bánêsh hoax were crushed under mountains of worthless art that they could not even persuade the dustmen to recycle. Many of Sir Malcolm's business competitors had been bankrupted by foolish investments in the Bánêsh school.

Yet the Viscount himself was richer than ever before! For now he seeped out a Kandinsky - a Roualt - a Matisse - a Munch - one at a time in a miserly fashion, at prices only an Arabian oil sheik could afford - and got them. In 1975, when he was declared incapable of handing his own affairs and his estate turned over to a conservatorship, his fortune was appraised at £10,000,000,000. Never in world history had so much money been put together through a shrewd combination of investments in the Cold War and the manipulation of Modern Art.

It was inevitable that Sir Malcolm would find himself canonized as the patron saint of Cashism, the art movement that flourished soon after his retirement from the world of public affairs.

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II. History of the Cashist Movement

The art movement that has been given the label of 'Cashism' is not very difficult to understand, but it is also very easy to misunderstand. One can safely venture, I believe, the assertion that not one critic out of five has correctly described its ideology, goals or methods. Even among the artists who call themselves Cashists, I would bet that only a handful really know what they're talking about.

Look at this statement by Marian Miller, a prominent art dealer , typical of many pronouncements that have been made about the cashist movement:

"The worth of a painting is equal to its market value at any given time and place."

This quotation appears in the catalogue drawn up for her exhibition of Cashist art in Santa Fe in 1982. What she is describing is not Cashism , but Auctionism, a very different phenomenon.

Or another:

"...the content of a work of art is perceived only indirectly. It is rather in the aura of monetary transactions that articulate its history that the symbolic values dormant in the latency of its substratum yield us their aptitudes towards transcendence, and that in retrograde."

This definition appeared in an article entitled " Cashism and Aesthetic Tradition" published in , a hokey arts magazine issued by the IRAV (Institute for Research into Aesthetic Values) at Harvard University.

The paragraph is straight gibberish. If it is to be given any meaning at all, it is saying that Cashists believe that the aesthetic value of an art work is to be found in the history of its market price. This statement is no more correct than that of Marian Miller, although it must be admitted that the naive, largely uneducated , public does subscribe to such a view: a great work is neglected for a long time, even centuries. Gradually people come to recognize its value. It becomes a classic. At long last it ends up in a museum somewhere and is priced at many millions of dollars.

In fact, the true Cashists ridicule this idea. The counter-example most often cited in the literature is that of the Benois Madonna, painted by Leonardo DaVinci in 1478. After his death it disappeared for several centuries, only to surface in 1824 in Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea. Here we have two versions: the first is that it was being guarded in a monastery run by Italian Jesuits. The other is that it was being carried around Europe by a troupe of Italian actors.

Whichever version is the correct one, it came into the possession of Price Kulagin, who sold it to an art dealer, Shagochinokov, who passed it along to his grand/daughter, Mme. Louis Benois, who, around 1916, persuaded Czar Nicholas II to buy it for the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. The 150,000 that the Czar paid for it made it the most expensive painting in history.

The Russian revolution came along before the sale could be completed . This canceled all government debts incurred by the Czar, and the Benois Madonna became the most cheaply obtained Renaissance masterpiece of all time.

Now, what does this curriculum vitae tell us about the intrinsic worth of the Benois Madonna? Nothing, our common

sense tells us, and the Cashists would agree with us. There is in fact only one aspect of this drama that would be of interest to a Cashist: the catastrophic reformulation of its market value by an act of war. The revitalizing effects of warfare on the art market is a perennial theme of the Cashist polemic.

"There is a nakedness in matter which thirsts for exploitation ." So writes the Cashist sculptor, Amos Bamberger. This is an admirable experience of the Cashist ideology in terms that the working artist can understand and use. It lacks, however, that scientific precision which is required by the critic desirous of assessing the social impact of the Cashist movement.

In his best-selling study of the movements of modern art, "The Chamber Music of Armageddon" (Time/Life Books, 1984; $76) lavishly illustrated) , Ronald Gaines has this to say: "Cashism relates to all previous traditions in painting much as physics relates to metaphysics. Because of this , it shares features with Conceptual Art and with Abstract Expressionism. It differs from these, however, in its valorization of the art object qua object, in a manner that has never been done before in the history of Western civilization. "

He goes on : " To the Cashist way of thinking, the visual, (musical , poetic, dramatic) pleasure that we take in a work of art is but the precursor, indeed only the catalyst, to the more authentic raptures that are stirred up at the moment of purchase, specifically that instant in which the money, (or its equivalent), changes hands."

An identical point of view is stated more succinctly in the excellent little " Illustrated Dictionary of Contemporary Arts and Artists" ,(Chambered Nautilus Press, 10th Edition, editor Lancelot Frazier, Brattleboro, Vermont, 1982; $49.95) : " CASHISM maintains that the essential aesthetic experience does not derive from the beauty or message of any art work, rather from meditation and reflection upon the beauty with which it has been bought or sold."

No other arts movement has ever brandished so audacious a claim. A debate early in the Cashist movement arose over the correct interpretation of the effect of the discovery of the New World in 1492 on the evolution of European art. In an article written for the National Review in April of 1970, Simon Orwell argues that the plunder stolen from the New World lay the foundation of all European cultural activity from the 16th to the 20th centuries . He found nothing wrong with this: "Surely", he states, " One Picasso is worth the whole conquest of Mexico!"

This statement lead Lionel Stokes, in a review of his essay in Art Marketplace , to call him an " inverted and affected snob with little understanding of true Cashist principles." To quote:
" Simon Orwell has misconstrued the real purpose behind the Cashist movement. For a genuine Cashist the real significance of the Spanish conquest of the Americas lies in the magnificent commerce in forged pre-Columbian art. We know that at least 90% of all the pre-Columbian bric-a-brac in American museums are forgeries. That somewhere in the jungles of the Yucatan peninsula there hides a gang that has been manufacturing the entire ruins of a totally fictitious pre-Aztec culture, the Chakmecs. Only last year a Mayan temple site, complete with pyramid, stelae and astronomical observatory, arose as if through magic in the interior of the state of Chiapas. Every single stone was a forgery but the Metropolitan Museum paid $100,000 to its 'discoverers' before the fraud was exposed. How can you compare Picasso to so grand a conception? From the viewpoint of true Cashism he's just a hack."

The Cult of the Ready-Made: 1972-85
" There is no thing that IS; there is only joy in trade"

-Amos Bamberger
Most Cashists claim Marcel DuChamp as an authentic ancestor. It is virtually a certainty that DuChamp, were he alive today, would vehemently reject this honor. DuChamp ridiculed banality. The Cashists on the other hand revere banality: the exquisite banality of the marketplace has inspired much in the way of rapturous expostulation. DuChamp , however, is revered as the inventor of the 'ready-made'. This is a manufactured item, an appliance for example, or gadget or utensil, that can be magically transformed into an important work of art because some famous artist has picked it up, looked it over, and said, "This is beautiful . ". He may then sign his name to it and send it to a museum. The process has analogies to the way in which a naturalist goes into the Amazon jungle, discovers a new plant, puts his name (in Latinized form) to it, and sends home specimens of it to the Museum of Natural History.
The difference between these two lies principally in the interaction with the workings of the Free Market. Let us say that someone goes into a hardware store and buys a bicycle wrench for $3.59. It is seen by a famous artist who, by calling it a great work of art, is able to sell it all auction for $5,000. Imagine later on that another,

equally famous artist, calls it a piece of rubbish: its market value falls to $0.77. Yet this may not the end of the story: a rich art collector who is building up a collection of ready-made for his private museum, actually buys up, not only the bicycle wrench itself which he displays in a glass case, but the patent for the wrench which he keeps locked up in a vault.

This is Cashism in all its purity. Here are the facts:

The bicycle wrench was purchased in Goleta, California on July 8, 1972, by Kenn Thomasêk, a Czech immigrant who operates a bicycle rental and repair shop for students at the University of Santa Barbara. It was seen on Thomasêk's workbench by David Daub, fine arts instructor at the Center for Creative Studies at UCSB. Daub, a much respected figure in American lithography, declared the design of the bicycle wrench to be one of the most stupendous conceptions ever to emerge from the human brain.

Thomasêk, who thought the whole thing a joke, donated the bicycle wrench to the CCS, which placed it on permanent exhibit in their lobby. In 1978, when the CCS was going through a financial crisis, the wrench was auctioned off on May 7th . Ready-mades were then at the crest of an unprecedented vogue and it was sold to the Guggenheim Museum in New York, for $5,126.94.

On June 4th , inside the Guggenheim and next to the wrench, Andy Warhol stood before the TV cameras and declared, quote : "This bicycle wrench is a piece of shit." On July 3rd the Museum quietly disposed of the wrench by selling it to one of its janitors for $0.77

The story does not end there. The janitor was quite famous in his native land, Kenya, as a wood sculptor, although totally unknown in the West. He had taken the job as a janitor in the Guggenheim because it would allow him to be in touch with the art world. When the political situation that had forced him into exile changed he returned to Nairobi and used the wrench as the cornerstone of the ready-made collection of a museum of contemporary art that he and his associates set up in Nairobi.

The museum was successful and served as a model for other museums around the world. It became standard practice for any museum starting up a ready-made collection to purchase a copy of this now infamous bicycle wrench directly from its manufacturer, a small factory in Indiana.

Finally, in 1982, Arlo Harbison, a Texas oilman opened his private collection of ready-mades ,in the museum he had established on the grounds of his estate outside Tucson , Arizona, to the public. He made the decision to protect his investment by buying up all the patents for every object in

the collection. Today the patent for this bicycle wrench, along with the patents for over 300 other items, including a shower curtain, hangers, an electric orange juice maker, rakes, shovels, spark plugs, a Sterno can, an inflatable gas mask, a dozen different models for glasses, curtain rods, hammers, screws, thumb-tacks and so forth, rest in a vault in a Dallas bank.

Cashism and the Avant-Garde, 1979 - 1985

This is a great work of art - Russ Oppenheimer

The vogue of the ready-made was parallel in its development to the Cashist movement. They collided head-on in 1979: June 16th to be precise. It was on that day that an otherwise unremarkable painter by the name of Russ Oppenheimer was sitting in The Blue Cat, an artist's hangout in the Soho district of New York, in the company of several very famous painters, including Robert Motherwell, Robert Rauschenberg, Helen Frankenthaler, Willem de Koonig, and Jasper Johns.

At 1:37 A.M. Oppenheimer lifted up a glass filled with water, pointed to its contents and said: "This is a great work of art." He made it very clear that he was referring specifically to the water and not to the surrounding glass. Rauschenberg seconded him. Then de Kooning announced that he intended to give up painting, because he had never done anything so beautiful as the water in that glass. Then Helen Frankenthaler suggested that the water be preserved and exhibited somewhere as the first ready-made ever discovered in a natural chemical compound. Before the night was over, they had composed a joint letter to Art in America, in which they affirmed that they had discovered a work of art in a glass of water and intended to sell it to either a museum or a private collector who would promise to protect its inherent aesthetic qualities.

They were probably only thinking of having a bit of fun. However the publication of this letter just happened to coincide with the vogue for ready-mades in the galleries. The letter, furthermore, had been written and signed by the most prestigious contemporary artists at that time- the letter alone could have been sold for $10,000. The water, which by consensus vote had been deemed the property of Russ Oppenheimer, was put on sale , in a party atmosphere and accompanied with much bantering publicity in the press, in the Upper East Side art gallery, Eye Contact, a few weeks later.

The bidding stopped at $3,276.42. The water was sold to a Chicago meat baron. It may still be found in his collection of ready-mades and other avant-garde art in a special room on his estate in Evanston, Illinois. It is kept in a glass box , the temperature of whose damp, regulated interior is permanently set at 1 degree Centigrade.

The Cashists went wild. The payment of an astronomical price for less than half a pint of water was only a threadbare step away from the purest of all Cashist conceptual artworks: the sale of empty space. This idea, by the way, had been suggested a year before in an article in The New Yorker, as a way of bringing Cashism in line with the popularity of the ready-made.

By 1981 there were Cashist auction houses in all the major centers of the American art commerce. It appeared that certain members of the class of the super-rich derived a lurid erotic thrill from the act of throwing away huge sums for empty boxes. Such auctions took place in an atmosphere of distemper and abandon, even intoxication. One might say that they exemplified conspicuous consumption at its most conspicuous.

But behind the facade of uninhibited madness one might discover a kind of grim , utterly ruthless, economic calculus. A Rockefeller could not afford to lose face to a Getty; nor would a Vanderbilt permit himself to be outbid by a Hunt. The seeming foolishness of these Cashist auctions was but the camouflage over a bloody battlefield in which the members of the American ruling plutoclass waged their pitiless war for domination.

The direct beneficiaries however were the adherents , whether sincere or merely opportunistic, of the Cashist school. With the utmost skill they worked these auctions up to a riotous, screaming pitch. In the delirium of them, veering at times on psychosis, hundreds of thousands of dollars passed into their hands without their customers even taking notice of them. At the other end of each transaction was Packaged Nothing.

The phenomenon of the Cashist auction died aware in 1985 because everybody became bored with it. No bubble had been burst, no deception exposed; merely a disease that had run its course.

Still , it was good for some people, because there were half a dozen years in which certain people and groups of the avant-garde had millions of dollars to play around with. Most of the money disappeared, as one might expect, into mammoth nonsensical projects such as wrapping the World Trade Center in SaranWrap, or hiring 10 Philharmonic orchestras to play C# for 24 hours.

Epilogue

In the hall of fame invoked by the Cashists, of persons who anticipated or exemplified their ideas, one finds DaVinci, DuChamp, Rouchomouvski, Dossena, Bastianini, Marinetti, van Maegheren, Buffet, Warhol, I.M. Pei. , Richard Feynman ,(the physicist, for playing bongo drums at Alamagordo), Napolean, Goering, Adah Isaacs Menken, and Nero.

It is clear from this list that the Cashists reserve a special place in their hearts for war. One of our important contemporary aesthetic philosophers7, Marvin Burke, recently wrote a book in which he sets out to demonstrate that of the three motives that inspire the creative imagination to the invention of deadly weapons, namely defense, economics or aesthetics, the latter is by far the strongest.

In a long chapter devoted to DaVinci's notebooks, he describes how a great artist can become deeply fascinated with all the subtle details of the craft implicit in the design of instruments of cruelty and murder.

" Compared to Leonardo", he writes, " Archimedes was a barbarian. The brilliant Greek mathematician only designed catapults and burning lenses, whereas the sublime Florentine labored for decades on the loving elaboration of spears, knives, pikes, swords, arrows and staves twisted about in every diabolical fashion, so that any attempt to extricate them must tear out the organs in which they are lodged. How, I ask you, can one begin to compare the barren ingenuity of the empirical scientist with the sensuous soul of the master artist?"

War, the Cashists want us to believe, because it excites the imagination of artists, is a good thing. They give many reasons in defence of this view:

War stimulates trade by encouraging the plundering of art treasures. Marvin Burke, adapting the classic dictum of von Clausewitz, reminds us that "War is tourism by other means."

Then , war is a rich source of ready-mades. You can find Cashists who claim that, although the MX-missile should be considered a great work of art, the only way that one can know this is by taking it out of its silo and putting it into the Museum of Modern Art. In 1985, the Israeli's Uzi pistol received the DuChamp metal for being, " an artwork of such splendour that it renders the Parthenon irrelevant."

Finally the Cashists approve of war because it interposes the machine between all normal human relations. These views

derive directly from Italian Futurism in the early part of the century, which is why Marinetti is one of their heroes. Cashists part company with the Futurists however, over the issue of praise for the 'manly virtues' that war is supposed to bring out, at least in some people. Cashists , emphatically, do not believe in manly virtues. To quote Ronald Gaines once more:
" A coward can accumulate a million dollars. A hero can die a homeless derelict. It is only in the context of buying and selling that human identity attains to authenticity."

1 A parallel branch of the Spencer-Yardleighs through a common ancestor, Lord Throttlebeak, sometime keeper of the royal seal in the age of the Hanovers
2 He was born in 1895. He became senile in 1975 and died in a old person's home for the very rich in 1988.
3 clustered around the Journal for Studies in Cubism, published by the University of Kansas in Lucas, Kansas.
4 Bânésh , now in his 90's, is still very much alive. He has broken his drug addiction and keeps his alcohol consumption under control. He lives in an elderhotel in a well-to-do London suburb. As a painter he is now nothing more than a household joke.
5The Ridings
6 Manfred Stoat, London Times, Arts Section, April 22, 1959
7 He has been called the " Benedetto Croce of the NY Review of Books"