

DADADA Simon Lewis



Later, to the police, Ayumi described the men as typical gaijin, and when asked to elaborate said tallish and a bit boxy. The outfits she was good on though.

She'd even recognised some labels: knock-off Adidike sneakers, a Lennie Marstein polo shirt, Topsport sweatpants, Levi's 901s - the bootcut version with the raised seams that were in for a while last year. The masks were your basic woolly ski model.

Ayumi was circuiting 'Dada: Anarchy in Motion' and feeling baffled and a little intimidated. Normally she liked galleries. She'd done the Prado, the Orsay, the Uffizi, and the National, and all in less than two weeks. Those were nice places. Cool and quiet with comfortable chairs, and you could just feel the culture hanging in the air, purifying you. But this National Gallery of the Avant Garde was different, its atmosphere more challenging. It wasn't a cute old building with fluted columns and scrolly bits around the windows, but a converted factory by a sludgy river, functional and bossy looking. Inside it was nothing, just a big room with white walls and a polished wooden floor, just a

superclean warehouse, all clinical and sciencey; she felt like a specimen under the bright lights.

In those other places, she'd found, as you stood there appreciating with your head cocked, weight on one hip, one foot turned out, hot Euro guys would come up to you and talk aesthetics. But the small scattering of art appreciators here were all intense and weird looking with no desire to share. Sort of people you might see at the meeting of some fringe political group. Here was a bald Latino in a boiler suit gripping his catalogue tightly and rocking slightly back and forth in some kind of culture trance. A couple of short-haired girls kept earnestly humming as they strolled. They wore paint-splattered jeans, just so everyone knew they went to art college. An old guy wearing, of all things, a green beret, shuffled ponderously. A peering little Indian tapped his teeth with his specs as he appreciated. The person she could relate to most was the stoic attendant, a glassy faced woman of indeterminate age waiting out her hours on the chair.

And what was this stuff on the walls? Ayumi was no connoisseur but she knew what she rated. She reckoned she could tell a good big dark old oil painting from a mediocre one. She was up enough on the modern period to smile at Surrealism and pop, nod at abstract expressionism. But this stuff had her completely thrown. Dada? What kind of name was that? It sounded like baby talk. She couldn't even see what made it art. It looked like random detritus, crap you might find in an attic; bits of newspapers, rubbish, lumps of metal.

Seemed the guys liked writing manifestos more than making art. There were slogans everywhere; you didn't look at this exhibition so much as read it. 'Dada is a state of mind'. 'The true Dadaist is against dada.' Some rather unpleasant poetry went on about tearing out your incontinent sexual organ, extinguishing your appetite for beauty, ecstasy, philosophy, and disinfecting you with vitriol.

Apparently this was all some zany upsurge that started way back as a reaction to the stupid meaninglessness of something called the First World War. Some crazy anarchos tried to stir up a fuss.

She had a gallery Jogboy stuck in her ear. It picked up where she was at and told her what was supposed to be good about what she was in front of.

'Jean Arp declared that he painted with nails,' said the suave, familiar voice of an actor whose name she couldn't recall. In vain she searched the lumps of coloured wood banged

>together for a striking texture or colour combination, a good curve, stuff she could riff off and use in her designs - she'd just got her first big commission, Kimiko's wedding, and still zip for ideas - but there was nothing there for her. She stepped back and the voice faded. She looked around. The weirdoes continued their manoeuvrings.

And what was this? Standing on a plinth inside a transparent vitrine in the centre of the big space was what looked to Ayumi like a urinal on its side. She decided to give the exhibition one last chance. It was, in fact, a urinal on its side, made of yellowing porcelain.

'Fountain, by Marcel Duchamp, 1917,' said the Jogboy. 'On loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, New York. Though he later remade it, this is the original, recently rediscovered in a Zurich attic. Duchamp acquired the urinal directly from J. L. Mott Iron Works, a manufacturer of plumbing equipment. Before submitting the piece as sculpture, Duchamp rotated the urinal ninety degrees from its normal, functional position, and added the inscription "R. Mutt 1917" - a pseudonym that synthesised the name of the manufacturer and that of the popular comic strip Mutt and Jeff. Fountain was the most notorious of Duchamp's readymades - ordinary objects presented as art -'

Well that made no sense at all. I could say this bag is a dress, doesn't mean anyone will wear it. In the Prado the colours and costumes in Velasquez had inspired. But how could a urinal help you? She didn't like Mr Duchamp; he seemed uncouth. The urinal was a dirty joke. What it made her think of most was the big double oval of the Momos logo and she realised she was hungry. Well she'd seen a Momos on the other side of the Thames, and there was a Takami Fried Shrimp on the way back to Southwark tube station. She wanted gudon and Pocari Sweat. Brit food did not seem to agree with her. All that grease.

'Readymades were a challenge to the Renaissance tradition that placed the artist as artisan and unique creator. Duchamp's readymades became art

through their placement in the gallery context. Duchamp forces us to examine our preconceptions and assumptions.

A high, sharp girl's squeal from the gallery foyer sliced into her thoughts. A harsh male voice followed.

'Down on the floor. Now.'

The voice was frightening, without restraint; something was happening. Ayumi clasped her elbows tight to her sides. Her hand rose to her open mouth. Greenberet, appreciating near her, breathed in sharply. The artgirls looked round and one took hold of the other's elbow. The attendant blinked. Boilersuit continued staring hard at a reproduction of the Mona Lisa with a moustache drawn on.

Three figures ran in, holding out shining guns that glittered under the bright lights. Sneakers made thumping heavy sounds on the floorboards.

'Everyone down on the floor!' The three voices together were huge and shocking in their sudden fury. 'Down on the floor now or you're fucking dead! Now! Move, get down, on the floor!' The men stalked and the straight arms holding the guns swivelled jerkily. 'Move! Down! On the floor! Fucking lie down!'

Ayumi banged her knees as she flattened herself against the cold wood. Her forehead hit hard. Her long dyed-red hair flopped across her head and fanned out. She glimpsed Greenberet topple. Boilersuit bent, put a hand down and then another and lay flat. The attendant's chair screeched on the floor as she toppled off it. She curled and put shaking hands on the top of her head.

'Everyone down now or you're dead! Now! Fucking move, get down, on the floor! Move! Down! On the floor!'

Ayumi felt her heart beating fast against the wood. She wanted to get lower, to cram her whole body down against the polished boards, as if that would make her safer. She could feel the grain of the wood on her cheek. The men split up and strode, taking over the big space. From here their legs looked huge, their heads, crude looking in the black masks, distant.

'Revolutionised the possibilities for art-making through the direct use of manufactured consumer products.'

One man wore a dark blue mask. He strode into the foyer and out of sight. A second man, whose mask was green with yellow piping round the eye and

mouth holes, stopped shouting and planted himself, legs wide apart, in the centre of the room. He jerked his outstretched arms up at the elbow so the gun was pointing to the ceiling. His head turned left, right, left, always moving, like a bird's. The third man wore a mask with a design of clubs and hearts. He walked calmly towards Ayumi.

Ayumi felt that it was very important to be quiet. She focused on being utterly noiseless, opening her mouth wide so her breath wouldn't sound so loud.

'If I say it's art; it's art.'

Her hair was itchy on her cheek and nose. Through its parted curtain she saw the man approach. He was heading straight for her, she realised, and it would take him only nine or ten of his big strides. His legs were purposeful and quick and getting bigger and nearer. She gulped down a scream.

And still the man in the dark blue mask was shouting, on his own now, but the stream of his voice had calmed and lowered and there was no fury in it, just excitement. He was speaking for the sake of speaking, the words had become a chant, for himself: 'Everyone stay down now, stay, don't move, don't move, stay on the floor, come on.'

'You be quiet,' said clubsandhearts in stilted English. 'I have to concentrate.' Blue mask shut up.

'A revolution in conception, the beginning of conceptual art, of art that takes place in the head.'

A snapping sound. Clubsandhearts placed a metal folding stool down next to the plinth and sat carefully down. He leant delicately forward and stared with rapt attention, like an art appreciator, at the plastic lock of the vitrine.

He tucked the gun into an inside pocket of his jacket and took out a long leather pouch and unfolded it on his thigh.

'Art without artistry, the only kind we really deserve, the true expression of mass production.'

The pouch was full of metal and electronic implements neatly lined up. He slid out from its casing something like a screwdriver with tiny buttons all along it. He inserted it gently into the vitrine lock and then clipped a wire to it and examined something like a watch on the other end. There was no hurry about his movements.

'No longer a base receptacle, but a fountain of dangerous ideas.'

Ayumi closed her eyes and choked back the sick feelings and waited for it all to be over. She hoped the police would not come. Let them get away with it, let them know what they are doing and let them not be patched.

'Come on,' yelled blue mask.

'Please be quiet while I'm working,' mumbled clubsandhearts.

'...a manufacturer of plumbing equipment. Before submitting the piece as sculpture, the artist rotated the urinal ninety degrees.'

She opened her eyes. Now clubsandhearts was teasing the lock with something slim and bendy and vaguely organic. It made a sudden sucking sound.

'Can you break this at all or shall we go home?' snapped bluemask.

'You don't break this,' mumbled clubsandhearts, 'you have to seduce it.'

'I think I can hear sirens,' said bluemask. His voice rose and grew urgent. 'I can hear sirens. I can hear them. They're coming.'

'Where? How far?' said green with yellow piping.

'We've not got long, not long now.'

'Come on, come on,' Bluemask took two steps into the room and then turned and walked back again.

The attendant coughed. Green with yellow piping jerked and pointed his gun at her.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered in a little cracked voice. 'I'm very sorry.'

'Be quiet and maintain your composure,' snapped clubsandhearts.

'Duchamp's provocative gesture revolutionised the possibilities for art-making through the direct use of manufactured-'

A series of soft wet clicks and clubsandhearts stood up and yelled 'We're in.' The vitrine slid smoothly down into the plinth base. He stepped back and took out his gun. Holding it casually down beside him he watched as the other two men ran over and lifted the urinal. The three of them rushed for the exit, clubsandhearts in front. He talked loudly in a urbane way.

'You all stay down understand? Stay down. Don't move. We're still here. We're not going anywhere, we're just outside.'

'If I say it's art; it's art.'

Ayumi was the first to move; she took the Jogboy out of her ear.

Three weeks later, snug in her Cube in Osaka, she saw more about it on the screen. They'd flogged eight urinals to furtive collectors before they were caught. Turned out they were an Estonian collective specialising in conceptual theft. She wondered what Duchamp would say.

Above her desk she had her inspiration noticeboard. Next to the Velasquez postcard she'd pinned the back page of the gallery's free handout, a black and white photo of the Zurich group posing on steps; thin, serious, natty young men, smartly dressed as if for church. It had helped a lot with this thorny wedding commission; she'd done all the guys. Say what you like about the Dadaists, they wore good suit.

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