

ARTS & LETTERS

Artists have been transforming ordinary objects into art for over 70 years; during his Dada period, Marcel Duchamp created art from bicycle wheels and other household items. During the 1950s, American artist Robert Rauschenberg extended Dadaist ideas by creating art deliberately designed to change over time. Rauschenberg argued that his assemblages, made from beds, stuffed birds, garbage, and dirty laundry, were designed to capture "the smell, and the feel of our total environment."

Rauschenberg, argues Barnett, "opened up the path for art with built-in obsolescence." His successors include Christo, the Bulgarian artist who wraps bridges, cliffs, and islands in cloth, and the German artist Joseph Beuys, who creates sculptures from felt, honey, and slabs of fat to symbolize "decay and the inevitable passage of time."

Museum conservators must decide if work meant to self-destruct *should* be restored, as restoration might conflict with the artist's intent. Because modern artists are so eclectic in their choice of materials, conservators frequently preserve blemishes (such as insects) that would be removed from the art of earlier centuries. For example, a conservator left a cigarette butt embedded in one of Jackson Pollock's paintings because he believed that Pollock "must have purposely worked it into the paint."

While most artists still use longer lasting materials in their work, others are indifferent to preservation. Rauschenberg, for example, believes that decay makes art more closely resemble life. "There is nothing wrong," he says, "with the joy of living with a cherishable perishable."

The BOMC Lives

"Seven Hundred Pretty Good Books" by Terry Teachout, in *The New Criterion* (Oct. 1987), 850 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10019.

Three decades ago, critic Dwight Macdonald, in his essay "Masscult and Midcult," argued that the Book-of-the-Month Club was the quintessential middlebrow American literary institution. The club, Macdonald claimed, "has been supplying its members with reading matter of which the best that can be said is that it could be worse."

Was Macdonald right? Teachout, a *New York Daily News* editorial writer, argues that deteriorating standards and changing methods of book distribution augur a steady decline in the club's selections and influence.

The Book-of-the-Month Club was founded by Harry Scherman in 1926. In those days, books were poorly distributed outside large cities; in 1930, for example, 32 percent of Americans had "no direct access" to a bookstore. Scherman proposed to bring these Americans "new light upon their troubled but wonderful world" by selling them mail-order books. Scherman's greatest innovation: asking a panel of distinguished literary figures, such as *Saturday Review of Literature* editor Henry Seidel Canby and critic Christopher Morley, to choose the main selections.

The club was an early success; membership increased from 4,750 to 110,588 in the club's first three years (1986 membership, including subsidiaries, stood at 2.5 million). Yet the selection board's insistence on consensus votes meant that many novelists were not chosen by the club until late in their careers. William Faulkner was ignored by the club for 36 years

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after his first novel was published; Saul Bellow was shunned for 31 years. F. Scott Fitzgerald was never selected during his lifetime.

In recent years, the club's importance has diminished. Chain bookstores have spread throughout exurbs and rural areas, cutting into the club's major market. Publishers increasingly prefer more profitable bookstore sales to splitting their profits with a book club. Moreover, Teachout reports, serious bestselling novels, such as those of John P. Marquand (*The Late George Apley*), are no longer being written. Club judges have filled this void by selecting "fifth-rate throwaway tracts" by such novelists as John Irving and E. L. Doctorow.

Teachout thinks the BOMC has done its best to survive a period of American literary decline. "In its well-meaning, idealistic way," he maintains, the club brings "pretty good books to the prairies year after year."

Emerson the Showman

"The Making of an American Prophet: Emerson, His Audiences, and the Rise of the Culture Industry in Nineteenth-Century America" by Mary Kupiec Cayton, in *The American Historical Review* (June 1987), American Historical Association, 914 Atwater, Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind. 47405.

For much of his career, American philosopher-essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) toiled in obscurity. Such early works as *Nature* (1836) were reviewed only by Emerson's fellow Unitarians in church tracts or by



Emerson's success on the lecture circuit coincided with the publication of his most noted works. Among them: English Traits (1856); The Conduct of Life (1860); May-day, and Other Pieces (1867), a collection of poems, and Society and Solitude (1870).