Dadaism – a mask play, a burst of laughter? And behind it, a synthesis of the romantic, dandyistic and – daemonistic theories of the 19th century.

2 Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) ‘The Richard Mutt Case’

Duchamp, having abandoned painting and emigrated to America, began to produce ‘Readymades’, works calculated to reveal, among their other effects, the workings of the art institution as inseparable from the attribution of artistic value. In 1917, under the pseudonym Richard Mutt, he submitted a urinal to an open sculpture exhibition; the piece was refused entry (as he no doubt intended). The present text was originally published in The Blind Man, New York, 1917. It is reproduced here from Lucy Lippard (ed.), Dadas on Art, New Jersey, 1971.

They say any artist paying six dollars may exhibit.

Mr Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion this article disappeared and never was exhibited.

What were the grounds for refusing Mr Mutt’s fountain: –

1 Some contended it was immoral, vulgar.
2 Others, it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing.

Now Mr Mutt’s fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bathtub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see every day in plumbers’ show windows.

Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.

As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges.

3 Tristan Tzara (1896–1963) ‘Dada Manifesto 1918’

Rumanian by birth, Tzara arrived in Zurich in 1915 where he participated in the Cabaret Voltaire. He later edited Dada, the most important of the French Dada reviews. The ‘Manifesto 1918’ was originally read in Zurich on 23 March 1918. It was first published in Dada, no. 3, 1918 and reprinted in Sept Manifestes Dada, Paris, 1924. The present extract is taken from Motherwell, The Dada Painters and Poets (op. cit.).

The magic of a word – Dada – which has brought journalists to the gates of a world unforeseen, is of no importance to us.

To put out a manifesto you must want: ABC to fulminate against 1, 2, 3, to fly into a rage and sharpen your wings to conquer and disseminate little abcs and big abcs, to sign, shout, swear, to organize prose into a form of absolute