

INTRODUCTION: DUCHAMP'S READYMADES — A REEVALUATION

In a poll conducted for Gordon's Gin, the 2004 sponsor of the Turner Prize, a large majority of the 500 leading artists, dealers, critics and curators surveyed named Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (Fig. 1.8) the work of art that has had the highest impact on contemporary art today. The urinal that in April 1917 was turned around, signed R. Mutt, handed in to but then refused (or at least displaced) from the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York still seems to mock and destabilize the whole horizon of expectance that works of art generate: skill, originality, taste, aesthetic value, difference from utilitarian technology, distance from bodily functions, even stable objecthood.

Although many observers worry that the art institution has long since domesticated and commercialized the avant-gardist riot that *Fountain* took part in initiating, this object—albeit lost almost immediately after it was conceived—retains its status as an ever-flowing source for the disruptive and subversive energy in which contemporary art forms, at least desire to, participate. Whereas its closest competitor in the same poll, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)* from 1907, makes its revolution still in the domain of form—as if, in Braque's words, Picasso had drunk petroleum in order to spit fire at the canvas—*Fountain* and its small family of other readymades make their riot by completely abandoning the battlefield of forms, what Duchamp termed the retinal.

On the one hand, by appropriating pieces of technology that were not produced by Duchamp himself but by machines—a urinal, a bottle dryer, a dog comb, a snow shovel, an art reproduction, and so on—the readymades bring attention to what we could call the thingness of art: that despite all the transformations to which the artist can subject artistic materials, there is still a leftover of something pre-given, a naked materiality imported from the real, non-imaginary world. On the other hand, exactly by minimizing the artist's manual intervention, the readymades ultimately turn artistic creation into a question of choice. They thereby shift the attention to the world of the intellect and the institutional setting, the domain we have since the 1960s termed the conceptual: what are the more or less invisible, non-retinal, rules that make this particular work a work of art?

So, at the same time as the readymades stress thingness, they also, and quite paradoxically, minimize the essence of this thingness, making it seemingly interchangeable, as revealed by the machine origin of the readymades and the many replicas produced by Duchamp and others. This impersonal mode of art-making seems to be fundamental for Duchamp, also when he interferes more closely in the form-giving of materials, as seen in the *Large Glass* (1915-23) (Fig. 3.2) which exists in several copies too. It is this binary material-conceptual move, framing whatever pieces of matter with auras of symbols, which in hindsight perhaps makes Duchamp rather than Picasso the most influential artist of modern art (if that is how art after 1900 should indeed be designated).

A multitude of words have been directed at the readymades after they and their initiator were rediscovered from the late 1940s onward by artists such as John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg and Richard Hamilton. So is it at all possible, a good century after the non-exhibition of *Fountain*, to say anything new about the readymades? The articles in this issue of *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* dare to try. Deriving from a symposium entirely devoted to the readymades, which took place at Aarhus University from 31st May to 1st June 2018 with Jacob Wamberg as organizer, the seven chapters to follow approach the subject from a variety of angles, re-examining some of the readymades' immediate temporal frames and conceptual vicinities, probing into their philosophical references—from temporality, to space, to technology—and pursuing their aftermath both within and beyond Duchamp's work.

When browsing through the harvest of books and articles coming out of the centennial of *Fountain* (Fig. 1.8), Thierry de Duve notes that “newly verified facts are few and far between,” and so, if Duchamp scholars want to enter a truly unexplored ground, they have to “embrace new hypotheses and new heuristic frames for their questions.” In his own contribution, “The Story of *Fountain*: Hard Facts and Soft Speculation,” de Duve zooms in on the immediate contexts of the readymades, including a recent archival revisit of the contemporary plumbing industry. Ironically, observes de Duve, whereas *Fountain* has become infamous for reinserting in an art context a piece of industrialism, contemporary advertising preferred to frame the same sort of sanitary equipment as artistic creation. Moreover, reflecting upon the complex game of authorship, agency and mail-like sender- and receivership surrounding *Fountain*, de Duve sees it more specifically as a carefully staged piece of *talionism*, a discrete revenge against the self-pompous promoter of correct Cubism, Albert Gleizes, who

happened to be in New York at the time. Five years earlier Gleizes had contributed to discrediting Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)* (Cp. Fig. 4.1) from the Parisian *Salon des Indépendants*, and hence he could now be reminded of his base conservatism when the same sort of refusal (and once again an unfair one) besieged *Fountain* at the newly established sister exhibition in New York.

As a supplement to this revisit of Duchamp's most canonic piece, Thomas Girst probes the half-forgotten periphery of readymade production in his "'That very funny article': *Pollyperruque*, and the 100th anniversary of Duchamp's *Fountain*." An early example was the first piece on the artist in a major American newspaper, appearing on September 12, 1915 in the Sunday edition of *The New York Tribune*. Although written by Duchamp's later friend, editor and critic Henry McBride, it is exclusively marked "By Marcel Duchamp". To add to Girst's observations, one is tempted to believe this was actually an example of decentralized authorship instigated by Duchamp himself. In another example, the piece of mail art *Pollyperruque* (1967) (Fig. 2.2), sent to the New York gallerist Arne Ekstrom from Duchamp's summer residence in Spain, the artist makes encyclopaedic bird knowledge the vehicle for erotically charged punning, referencing in particular his recently finished piece, *Étant donnés* (1946-66) (Fig. 2.4).

In "Connecting Threads: Duchamp's Readymades and *Large Glass* Project in Context, 1913-1914," Linda Dalrymple Henderson transports the readymades into the terrain of Duchamp's unfinished magnum opus, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23) (Fig. 3.2), and thereby also into Duchamp's speculations on contemporary physics and technology. The focus of her attention is Duchamp's journey in August 1913 to the British coastal resort Herne Bay, to which he accompanied his younger sister, mainly playing tennis while she studied English. Thus, Henderson demonstrates how the tennis racquet press became a central metaphor for Duchamp at this time. Apart from the pressure around the strings being echoed in the readymade *With Hidden Noise* (1916) (Fig. 3.5), it is structurally reminiscent of the *Large Glass*' tripartite division in which the infinitesimally thin clothes of the Bride, echoing again the racquet strings, are sandwiched between the Bride's upper aerial domain and the Bachelors' lower prosaic one. Likewise, the electrical bulbs from the pier of Herne Bay, lighting up against the anti-retinal blackness of the night sky, find an echo in the Bride, as well as in the transparent readymade *Paris Air* (1919) (Fig. 3.12), encapsulating the atmospheric element in a bulb-like vessel.

In “‘There is No Progress, Change is All We Know’: Notes on Duchamp’s Concept of Plastic Duration,” Sarah Kolb relates involvement in contemporary mechanical technology with a philosopher who is often seen as Duchamp’s intellectual antipode, Henri Bergson. Whereas the Cubists and Futurists sought to translate Bergson’s ideas on duration—time as perceived by intuition—directly into retinal wholes, stitching together individual impressions into more or less comprehensive montages, Duchamp in contrast foregrounded the mechanical derivation of the singular cuts and, accordingly, their non-organic incoherence. The very notion of readymade is indeed an appropriation of Bergson’s term for the mechanical and anti-intuitive, *tout fait*, that only gains relevance as a comic device. Discussing a number of Duchamp’s works in transition from painting to readymade, including two experimental texts attempting to break down any conventional meaning, Kolb argues that Duchamp nevertheless embraced Bergson’s idea of duration.

Jacob Wamberg’s article “Shrink to Expand: The Readymades through the *Large Glass*” stresses Duchamp’s ambivalent attitude to contemporary technology. Although the readymades could be seen as a more radical engagement with the mechanical and its cutting up of time than allowed for by Bergson and his Cubist and Futurist followers, this engagement is also a subversive one, wrecking the industrially produced utensils out of their habitual functions. Mobilizing Giorgio Agamben’s reading of Herman Melville’s short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1856), Wamberg sees this mild sabotage performed by the readymades as an instance of *epoché*, the skeptical suspension of judgment in which actualization is erased in order to upgrade potentiality. Instead of considering this as a special feature of the readymades, Wamberg understands the readymades as objects that metaphorically have passed through the *Large Glass* (Fig. 3.2), the spatial down-scaling from higher to lower dimensions in the transparent glass converging towards the readymades’ erasure of predicted actualization. What Duchamp calls the “common factor” between readymades and *Glass*, then, could be described as a generalized stripping bare of actualization, a neo-alchemical strategy of creation through decreation of already existing materials.

Following these explorations of the significance of readymades in relation to the philosophies of time, space and technology, the last two articles focus on the aftermath of the readymade, both within and beyond Duchamp’s oeuvre. In his article “The Second half of the Readymade Century (1964–),” Dieter Daniels notes

the ironic fact that most of the readymades now in existence are not the ones that were produced industrially and initiated by Duchamp into the periphery of the art world around the World War I. Rather, stamped with Duchamp's authority, a host of carefully reconstructed replicas were circulated as multiples in 1964, 50 years after the first readymade came into existence. With all their fetishist aura of hand-crafted originals, these collectors' items have, in Daniels' view, given in to that same art market which Duchamp originally sought to escape. Confirming Peter Bürger's criticism of the neo-avantgardes as being absorbed by the art institution, these reconstructed readymades are premonitions of the appropriation strategies that have been pervasive in the artworld since the 1980s.

For David Joselit, in his article "The Property of Knowledge," the readymades indeed "afford a highly efficacious device for exploring postindustrial knowledge economies" by superimposing an ambivalent intellectual property onto the industrially produced commodities that are the readymades' point of departure. In parallel with Wamberg's exploration of *epoché*, Joselit sees the readymades' primal innovation as a suspension of judgment, their mode of operation being analogous to that of photography and its multiplicity of roles in relation to traditional fine art media. More precisely, Joselit sees three dimensions of readymade practice: an ontological one, equating commodity and art object; a semantic one, exploring readymades as lexical elements within the artworks; and a cultural one, in which appropriated objects and images intervene in global conflicts of cultural property.

We tend to believe this collection of articles will refresh our understanding of the seemingly inexhaustible phenomenon of the readymade, and we hope our readers will not disagree—perhaps even finding some Duchampian amusement.

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