The Art of Indifference: Duchamp and the Legacy of Readymades

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The ART of INDIFFERENCE

Duchamp and the Legacy of Readymades

Kristine Somerville

Jeff Koons, *Acrobat*, 2003–2009. © Jeff Koons

"I believe art is the only form of activity in which man shows himself to be a true individual."

—Marcel Duchamp

Marcel Duchamp never sought fame and certainly not infamy. His natural disposition was one of detachment; he was uniquely indifferent to money, attention, and a wide audience for his work. What he preferred instead was time and freedom to engage in radical experimentation. Yet he created controversy with works of art that today are among the most influential of the modern era.

The first time his art caused a stir was in 1913. The principal organizers of the International Exhibition of Modern Art had selected four of Duchamp's paintings for inclusion. Among the selection was *Nude Descending a Staircase*, a cubist-futurist-inspired painting of a figure in motion depicted from multiple points of view. At the Armory Show, as the exhibition came to be known, viewers lined up to get a look at this unusual piece. Some laughed, a few admired it, but most were simply confused. The work's provocative title, somber color palette and fragmented imagery epitomized to critics and viewers alike what was incomprehensible in the new modern art from Europe. American newspapers mocked the painting—"an explosion in a shingle factory" and "the rude descending a staircase"—and labeled Duchamp an artistic provocateur.

Four years later, Duchamp submitted *Fountain* to the Society of Independent Artists Exhibit, an exhibition twice the size of the Armory Show, with two miles of art from 1,200 contributors. The public never saw the piece, but its reputation as something strange and unusual spread. Duchamp had taken a store-bought porcelain urinal, turned it upside down, and signed "R. Mutt, 1917" along the rim. When Walter Arensberg and George Bellows unpacked *Fountain* in the exhibition storeroom at the Grand Central Palace, they argued over its merit. Bellows thought it was a joke; there was no way they could exhibit it. Arensberg found artistic value in the urinal's organic shape and argued that the artists were allowed to submit anything of their choosing. The decision went before the board, which decided that something as vulgar as *Fountain* was in no way a work of art.

Since becoming an artist, Duchamp had struggled to find an approach that was intellectual rather than visual. In *Fountain*, he had achieved that goal. He had elevated a manufactured item to the level of

Jamie Isenstein, *Rug, Rug, Rug, Rug, Rug*, 2009, bear rug, sheep rug, wolf rug, Jamie rug, and apartment rug. Image courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York. Photo: Meyer Riegger, Berlin/Karlsruhe

art through the act of selecting, naming, and signing it. By removing ordinary objects from their usual environment and placing them in a new context, the artist created new ways of seeing the artifacts of everyday life: "readymades," as they came to be known. The concept was unprecedented and undermined every previous definition of art.

Henri-Robert-Marcel Duchamp was born in Blainville, France, in 1887. Of Eugène and Lucie Duchamp's six surviving children, a daughter died of croup, and four would become artists. When Marcel talked about his childhood, he said that it was happy, comfortable, and culturally rich and declined to elaborate. His older brothers, Jacques and Raymond, whom he came to admire and adore in later life, were away at school the year he was born. He was closest to his younger sister, Suzanne. Together they attended a one-room school until, like his brothers, he was sent off

Jamie Isenstein, *Empire of Fire (Fire Hose)*, 2010, fire hose, hanger, and hand or "Will Return" sign. Image courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York. Photo: Thierry Bal

to the Lycée Pierre-Corneille, a demanding and rigid school in Rouen. He was a mediocre student, excelling only in math and drawing.

Jacques and Raymond quit their studies—one was studying law and the other medicine—to become artists. Their father took their adventurous careers in stride and paid them a monthly allowance, which he subtracted from their future inheritances. Marcel soon followed suit. With 150 francs a month from his father, Marcel lived among artists in

Jamie Isenstein, *Dancing Pop-up Fishing Sculpture*, 2010, fabric, newspaper, glue, paint, "Worm in a Can" gag dinner mints, human leg, fishnet tights, tap shoe, human arm or velvet curtain, "Wishin' I Was Fishin'" or "Gone Fishing" life preserver, and pedestal. Image courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

Montmartre, a place of cheap rents, cafés, and nightclubs. He attended the Académie Julian, a private art school, but chafed against the formalist instruction. He cultivated an attitude of indifference as a flaneur, observing Parisian street life rather than participating in it.

In 1908, Duchamp made his debut as a painter at the Salon d'Automne, where one of his three pieces sold. Yet he professed contempt for artists who attempted to earn a living through their work. His goal was

Jeff Koons, *Gazing Ball (Bottlerack)*, 2006. © Jeff Koons. Photo: Melissa Castro Duarte, courtesy Almine Rech Gallery

to look for a new path in life. In part, this meant rejecting marriage and family in favor of bachelorhood: "The things life forces men into—wives, three children, a country house, three cars! I avoid material commitments. I stop. I do whatever life calls for me." This freedom allowed him to pursue a period of self-apprenticeship that he later called his "swimming lessons." He moved quickly through several phases—impressionism, postimpressionism, fauvism, symbolism, and cubism—in search of his own theories and ideologies.

Jeff Koons, *Gazing Ball (Stool)*, 2013–2016. © Jeff Koons. Photo: Melissa Castro Duarte, courtesy Almine Rech Gallery

After his brief cubist period, Duchamp became bored with painting. "The whole trend of painting was something I didn't care to continue," he said and rejected what he called "retinal art." He did not want to be the kind of painter who puts on canvas what he sees. He wanted to make art that transcended the world of materialist sensations and appealed to the intellect.

Duchamp did not expect anyone to be interested in his ideas or follow his often quite intellectualized approach. He was certain that there

Danh Vo, *08:03, 28.05*, 2009, late 19th-c. chandelier, installation view. From *Dahn Vo: Take My Breath Away* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Foundation, New York, 2018. Courtesy of the Marian Goodman Gallery

Danh Vo, *Take My Breath Away*, 2017, marble fragment from a standing male statue, *Leg and Feet*, Western Europe, Roman Empire, second century A.D., at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Foundation, New York, 2018. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery

were two kinds of artists: those who try to please society and those who forge their own paths, free of commitments and expectations. He belonged to the second group. He couldn't be true to himself if he sought acceptance from an audience; it was better to work and then wait for "the public that will come fifty years—a hundred years—after my death." His more immediate concern was whether one could make works that are not works of art. Ultimately, he wanted to demystify art and knock it off its glorified pedestal.

Şakir Gökçebağ, *Guests II*, 2004, size variable

Şakir Gökçebağ: TOP: *Trans Layers 1*, 2010, toilet paper; BOTTOM: *Blonde & Brunette*, 2015, shoe brushes

Monica Bonvicini, *White Socks*, 2009. © Courtesy of the artist and VG Bild-Kunst. Photo: Stefan Altenburger

Bicycle Wheel is often considered Duchamp's first readymade. But the front wheel of a bicycle mounted on a kitchen stool was more a pleasant gadget made for his own amusement, not to be shown. *Bottle Rack* fits more purely into his definition of a readymade. Rather than assembling it, he purchased it. Similarly, *In Advance of a Broken Arm,* a snow shovel bought at a hardware store, signed and hung from his studio ceiling, was a readymade because it had no aesthetic value. These were simply works

Monica Bonvicini, *Belt Exercise #6*, 2018. © Courtesy of the artist and VG Bild-Kunst. Photo: Jens Ziehe

created not by hand or skill but by the mind and decision of the artist. Duchamp produced no more than twenty readymades in his lifetime, believing that by limiting the number, he would maintain a sense of visual and stylistic indifference.

More than a hundred years later, Duchamp's ideas continue to have a liberating effect on contemporary artists who benefit from his concepts of what art is and can be. His influence on late twentieth-century

Tyrome Tripoli, *Romanian Barrel Form*, 2003

Tyrome Tripoli, *Hubcap Form*, 2005

and early-twenty-first-century art continues to spread and deepen. In their work, the seven artists presented here make clear references to Duchamp in their use of common everyday objects and in their inventive, playful spirit.

In *Gazing Ball (Stool)* and *Gazing Ball (Bottlerack)*, Jeff Koons creates a Duchampian experience by placing a blue spherical ornament usually found in suburban gardens atop everyday objects from the French artist's readymade canon. The gazing ball reflects the viewer looking at the art, thus creating a mutual relationship of creation and interpretation. Jamie Isenstein's inhabited sculptures also invite the spectator to be a partner in the creative process. In the inventive and playful *Rug, Rug, Rug, Rug, Rug*, a person is sandwiched between an ordinary area rug and a sheep, wolf, and bear rug, while in *Dancing Pop-up Fishing Sculpture*, a jumble of ordinary and extraordinary objects, the presence of a person also breaks through as she mixes the personal with the inanimate.

Danh Vo, a Danish artist who was born in Vietnam, extracts readymade materials and artifacts from their usual environment so that viewers can examine them in isolation. Two pieces, one an opulent chandelier and another a fragment of a man's foot and leg from a Roman sculpture,

Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *The Three Sisters*, 1984, chromogenic color print.
© Peter Fischli and David Weiss. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

from his *Take My Breath Away* exhibition were removed from their historical context and require a new, more personal kind of engagement.

German artist Şakir Gökçebağ's light, often funny sculptures alter the function of everyday objects so that the familiar becomes unfamiliar. *Blonde & Brunette* is comprised of two neatly stacked short towers of scrub brushes, one pile with light tan bristles and the other with dark brown. Any implication of their usefulness is eclipsed by the simplicity of their design and richness of their texture. *Trans Layers 1* is a mural of unfurling toilet paper rolls that stream across a white wall in looping layers of beauty. The mundane becomes interesting and unexpected in the work of Swiss art duo Fischli and Weiss. In the sculpture *The Three Sisters*, four women's leather pumps inserted heel to toe become a pinwheel ready to spin across a gallery floor. *Lost and Found* is an amalgam of forgotten, misplaced, or discarded items—an alarm clock, a wastepaper basket, a suitcase, a spindly chair, a mop—all hanging from a rack constructed from sawhorses, one on top of the other.

Italian artist Monica Bonvicini also places the ordinary and everyday in a new context. The thickness of the leather and heaviness of the silver buckle looped and mounted on the wall in *Black Belt #6* gives the conventional accessory an ominous quality. *White Socks*, a pair of

Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Lost and Found*, 1984, chromogenic color print.
© Peter Fischli and David Weiss. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Untitled (Rat and Bear, Sleeping)*, 2008/2009. Each: cotton, wire, polyester, and electrical mechanism. © Peter Fischli and David Weiss. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

well-worn work boots with cotton socks rising over the edge, suggests a spectral presence. Tyrome Tripoli's conceptual sculptures *Romanian Barrel Form* and *Hubcap Form* turn salvaged material—bright silver hubcaps and colorful oil barrels—into artful, abstract structures.

Duchamp chose to live in New York City in 1942 and became a US citizen in 1954. He loved America because it allowed him to maintain a quiet and contemplative life. As abstract expressionism and then pop art became the dominant artistic trends of the mid- and late twentieth century, Duchamp's reputation would rise and fall—for a brief time fading to complete invisibility, which he enjoyed. Yet his search for new ways of thinking and working with his readymades has achieved iconic status by offering a challenge to the idea of what can be called art.

After losing his friends and family one by one, he said that he too was patiently waiting for death. He died in 1968, at the age of eighty-one, having achieved what he wanted most: personal, intellectual, and artistic freedom. He believed that art was one of the highest forms of human activity and brought to his own work a free and adventurous mind. In 1966 he said of his life, "I had luck, fantastic luck. I never had a day without eating, and I have never been rich, either. So, everything turned out well."