

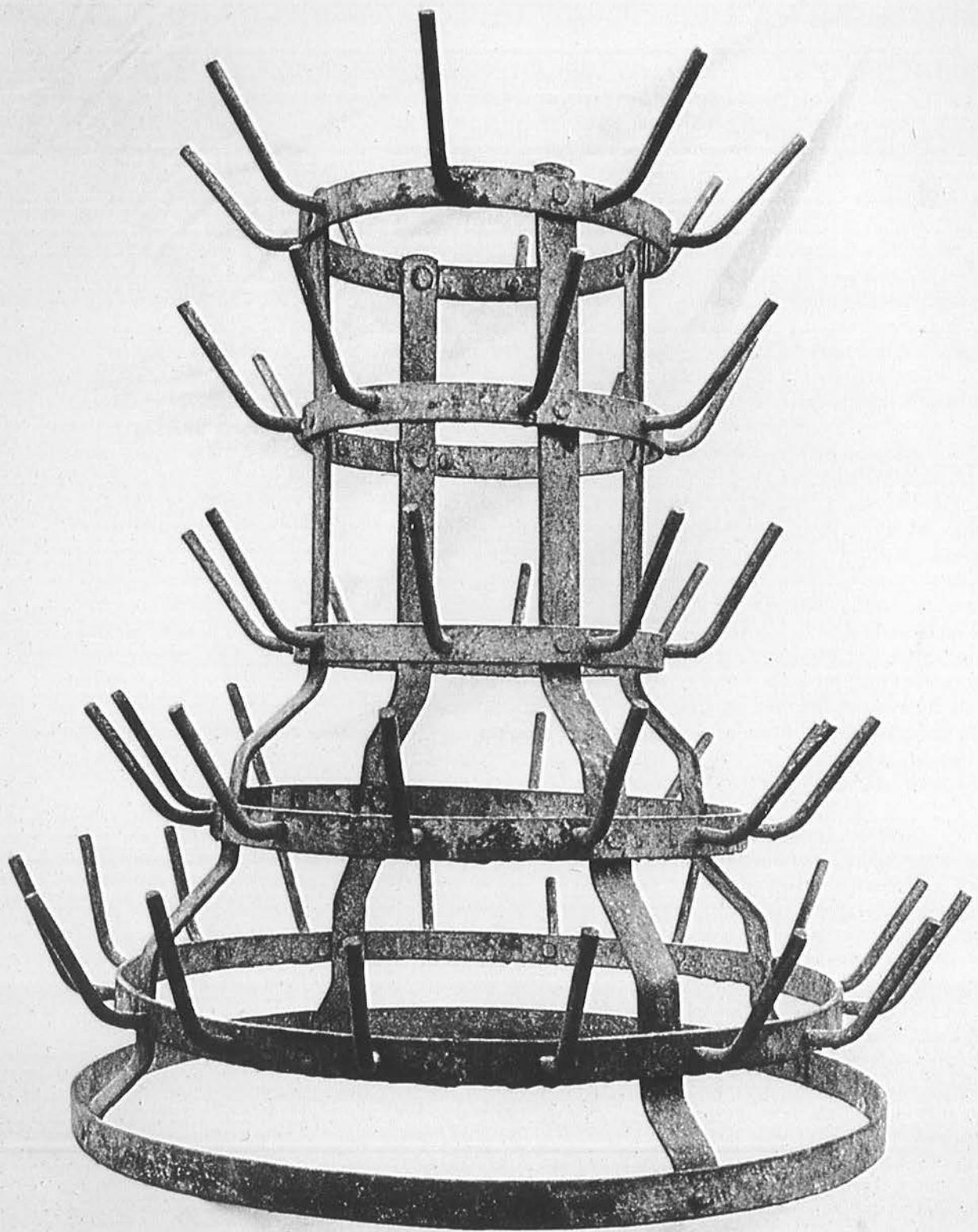
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The Readymade: Duchamp's Thing

Marcel Duchamp fully appreciated the twentieth century's proclivity for certainty and classification and this attitude became an essential component of his art. In this he was not unlike Freud or Einstein or, in his immediate artistic milieu of *belle époque* Paris, Stravinsky or Raymond Roussel. Of the playwright Roussel, Duchamp once noted with admiration that "starting with a sentence... he made a word game with kinds of parentheses... His word play had a hidden meaning... It was an obscurity of another order.¹ Roussel had economically undermined the totalizing tendency of word order, throwing all of its accepted significance into question. He did so by employing, not destroying, the 'givens.' Duchamp's strategy would be similar as is evident in his readymades. Duchamp describes the readymades in terms of what they were not. They "weren't works of art...weren't sketches" but rather objects, 'things' "to which no art terms applied." (Cabanne, p. 48) Like Roussel's parentheses which are not words but marks (not unlike letters in their most material sense), Duchamp's things were imbued with the accoutrements of art but were not 'retinal' art. Like bracketing, they are inserted into a highly structured world, and in the most economical manner question expose its fundamental nature.

As strategy the readymade was hardly ready made, rather it came about as the logical next step in Duchamp's seemingly methodical approach to art, an approach in no way unusual or exceptional until February of 1912. At that time, Duchamp sent his recently-completed *Nude Descending the Staircase* to the Paris Independents where, according to him, his "fellow cubists did not like it and asked me to, at least, change the title."² He refused and withdrew the painting, but it is significant that the controversy surrounding *Nude Descending the Staircase* had little to do with the inherent qualities of the work. Rather it revolved around not only the painting's title, but also its apparent allegiance to *both* Cubism and Futurism, movements which were regarded at the time as mutually exclusive. The importance of these two extraneous issues - titling and classification - were never forgotten by Duchamp. Together with framing and the notion of museumizing itself they serve as society's means of appropriating art, of controlling its display and therefore its momentum. Collectively, titling, framing, classification, and museumizing form a sort of systematic thinking, an ideology if you will (and one which extended far beyond the jurisdiction of the art world), whose authority and coerciveness Duchamp began to question and ultimately set out to undermine.

In effect, Duchamp's readymades unmasked the 'act' of representation. He would expose the arbitrary nature and illusionistic function of 'retinal' art by presenting an analogous condition, that is, by re-presenting representation, a tactic not new to the visual arts in France. Courbet's *The Painter's Studio, real allegory, summing up a phase of seven years in my artistic life* from 1854-55³ and any of a number of paintings by Seurat from the 1880's to 1891 might be seen as relevant predecessors to Duchamp's attempt. In *The Circus*, for example, Seurat painted the perimeter of his canvas to resemble a frame. This painted frame suggests that what is being portrayed in paint is a picture of a picture. That is, what we see is a painting of a framed picture, a painting whose proportions neatly coincide with those of the re-presented image, whose boundaries begin where the delineated boundaries of the re-presented end. By painting an illusionistic frame, Seurat appropriates the act of containment. Seizing the boundary between art and reality, he renders the subjective objective, reducing a picture to its material components: paint and canvas. His *pointilliste* technique promotes the materiality of the medium, discreetly dividing the surface of the picture into equal dabs of paint and thus accentuating its physicality (Cabanne, p. 47). While this division exposes the painting's objectivity, it simultaneously elevates its illusionism for its dot rendering insists that the 'picture' be actively constructed by the viewer. By objectifying, Seurat underscored the subjective nature of perception. Picasso's first collage *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1911-12) poses a similar question by replacing the medium of paint with swatches of 'reality' - notably a mariner's rope and a stock oil cloth pre-painted to resemble chair caning. Here again the frame (the mariner's rope) is part of the artist's domain, and as a three-dimensional 'real' object begins to question the status of the apparently two-dimensional painting, confusing classification by situating itself somewhere between painting



and sculpture.

Duchamp protracted this question at first unwittingly beginning in 1913. When he "put a bicycle wheel on a stool, the fork down, there was no idea of a 'readymade,' or anything else. It was just a distraction. I didn't have any special reason to do it, or any intention of showing it, or describing anything." (Cabanne, p. 47) In 1914, Duchamp chose his first Readymade, *Bottlerack*. "I just bought it, at the bazaar of the town hall. The idea of an inscription came as I was doing it. There was an inscription on the bottle rack which I forgot." There was no move to introduce the piece to the art world at this time. "When I moved from the rue Saint-Hippolyte to leave for the United States," Duchamp continues, "my sister and sister-in-law took everything out, threw it in the garbage, and said no more about it. It was in 1915, especially, in the United States, that I did other objects with inscriptions, like the snow shovel, on which I wrote something in English. The word 'readymade' thrust itself on me then." (de Harnoncourt and McShine, p. 275) Not until 1917, when Duchamp purchased a urinal from 'Mott Works' company in New York, signed it 'R. Mutt,' titled it *Fountain* and submitted it to the Independents exhibition to be hung on the wall rotated and upside down, did he confront the artistic establishment with his things.

Duchamp saw the readymade as an attempt to "reduce the idea of aesthetic consideration to the choice of the mind, not to the ability or cleverness of the hand which I objected to in many paintings of my generation." (de Harnoncourt and McShine, p. 275) He very carefully selected these objects. "I had to beware of its 'look.' It's very difficult to choose an object, because, at the end of fifteen days, you begin to like it or to hate it. You have to approach something with an indifference, as if you had no aesthetic emotion. The choice of readymades is always based on visual indifference and, at the same time, on the total absence of good or bad taste." (Cabanne, p. 48) For Duchamp, taste is merely a habit, the "repetition of something already accepted" and he maintained that mechanical drawing enabled him to avoid taste since it lies "outside all pictorial convention." He insisted that the 'functionalism' of the object "was already obliterated by the fact that I took it out of the earth and onto the planet of aesthetics." (Cabanne, p. 276) Finally, regarding the short sentences which he occasionally inscribed on the readymades, they were not intended to describe the object "like a title" but instead, Duchamp says, "meant to carry the mind of the spectator towards other regions more verbal."⁴

Duchamp did several variations on the readymade theme, but proliferation was necessarily prohibited by his own prescription for the objects: visual indifference and an absence of taste, that is "the repetition of something already accepted." That Duchamp later found it desirable to "expose the basic antinomy between art and readymades" by introducing a "Reciprocal Readymade" which would turn classic art into everyday objects ("use a Rembrandt as an ironing board"), suggests that his attempt to situate his work outside the boundaries of the art world was something which needed to be renewed regularly, that perhaps the museumizing tendency was more totalizing, or more accommodating, than he had initially thought. Or simply that his things, when considered as such, might have had an unanticipated appeal, might possess merit in themselves, not as anti-art.

Certainly, recent art theory and criticism view the readymade not so much as an object but as a gesture or as a moment in the history of art. Octavio Paz deems the readymades '*an-artistic*,' something in between art and anti-art, something "indifferent, existing in the void." He notes that "their interest is not plastic but critical or philosophical" and judges them "beyond beauty and ugliness... not creations, but signs, questioning or negating the act of creation." For him, the readymade "does not postulate a new value" rather it is "criticism in action;" it exudes "nonsignificance."

Here we might ask how Paz can assign nonsignificance to that which he previously designated as sign. He concedes that "form projects meaning" and consequently "nothing is more difficult than to find an object that is really neutral." Yet clearly, we must add, the readymades have form, often very pleasing form, and are anything but neutral. Presumably Paz would counter that Duchamp *neutralized* these things and that he did so by placing them in an art museum, by treating them as if they were, figuratively speaking, 'framed.' "Detached from its original context," Paz proceeds, "the

Readymade suddenly loses all significance and is converted into an object existing in a vacuum, into a thing without any embellishment." But the museum is not a vacuum, we might argue, in fact it serves as the missing frame which insists that we consider objects within its confines as worthy of contemplation. Furthermore, titles, inscriptions, pedestals and spotlighting would certainly seem to embellish the readymade. And Paz again concedes that the "really neutral" quality lasts "only for a moment" after which they succumb to an "invisible transformation and become objects for contemplation, study, or irritation."⁵

Peter Bürger, too, finds Duchamp's readymades "not works of art but manifestations."⁶ Readymades serve as exemplars in Bürger's 'theory of the avant-garde' which convincingly argues that avant-garde art sought to overthrow bourgeois art by interrogating the purpose or function of art, its production and its reception. Like Paz, Bürger believes that "the meaning" of the readymade cannot be inferred from its "form-content totality." Rather meaning can be ascertained "only from the contrast between mass-produced object on the one hand, and signature and art exhibit on the other." He sees the readymade as a provocation that relies "on what it turns against: here, it is the idea that the individual is the subject of artistic creation."

Both Paz and Bürger, perhaps in following the artist's cues, would seem to deny the 'thingness' of Duchamp's things, yet both would agree that his objects - bicycle wheel, bottlerack, urinal, comb, snow shovel, etc. - were carefully selected. Presumably both would recognize that these readymades share certain (decidedly non-pictorial?) characteristics, qualities which when considered collectively might even constitute if not an aesthetic, an 'obscurity of another order.' Diagrammatic, even mathematical, the "form-content totality" of these things certainly might be regarded as a three-dimensional formation of the mechanical drawing Duchamp employed in his attempt to avoid taste-making.

All of this is to say that lost in Paz's claim that the readymade "does not postulate a new value" and in Bürger's assurance that readymades are mere "manifestations" is the distinctive 'thingness' of these things as a positive characteristic worthy of contemplation in itself. 'Thingness' is a quality Martin Heidegger investigates in his *Die Frage nach dem Ding*, broaching the topic by contrasting the characteristics of modern science with those of ancient or medieval science. He dismisses the factual, experimental, measuring qualities of modern science in favor of a more fundamental feature which he claims "rules and determines the basic movement of science itself." This characteristic is science's "manner of working with the things and the metaphysical projection of the thingness of the things." Heidegger deems this manner *mathematical* and proceeds to analyze its formation. The Greek expression *ta mathemata* means "what can be learned and thus, at the same time, what can be taught." It is identified and understood in connection with its several determinations one of which is *ta pragmata*, that is, "things insofar as we have to do with them at all, whether we work on them, use them, transform them, or only look at and examine them." Heidegger goes on to note that the numerical is something mathematical and not vice versa. This is so because the mathematical is "that about' things which we really already know. Therefore we do not get it out of things, but, in a certain way, we bring it already with us."⁷

When we recognize in things something which we already have, this recognition is "genuine learning" and thus the numerical is something learnable for no thing or things in themselves exude threeness, for example, but "we can count three things only if we already know 'three'." Heidegger concludes that "the most difficult learning is to come to know actually and to the very foundations what we already know. Such learning... demands dwelling continually on what appears to be nearest to us, for instance, on the question of what a thing is. We steadfastly ask the same question - which in terms of utility is obviously useless - of what a thing is, what tools are, what man is, what a work of art is, what the state and the world are." (Heidegger, p. 252) In a truly philosophical approach to science, Heidegger notes, scientists seek to "create new ways of posing questions and, above all, hold out in the questionable." (Heidegger, p. 248)

Heidegger's philosophy offers another way of viewing Duchamp's project. Duchamp, it could be said, captures the basic movement of *art* itself by focusing on its "manner of working with the

things and the metaphysical projection of the thingness of things." This leads to something more than merely critical. In illuminating fundamental issues of art - naming, perception, measuring - he questioned the nature of knowledge. While the readymade may serve to dismantle, it also offers its 'thingness' for contemplation. In rendering visible museumization, the thingness of things becomes obvious. When Heidegger concludes that the *mathematical* is "this fundamental position we take toward things,... the fundamental presupposition of the knowledge of things," it is this position, this presupposition that Duchamp 'holds out as questionable.' Duchamp's questioning transcends the issue of museumization as it confronted him beginning in 1912. His investigation was ontological, in the deepest sense of the word philosophical.

In concluding it must be noted that Duchamps strategy of re-presenting representation extended far beyond the individual object. Although he subscribed to a philosophy of indifference, abhorred routine, and feared the habitual as taste-making, like no other artist Marcel Duchamp promoted the cumulative nature of his work. Time and again he collected his works together, re-presenting them as miniatures in, for example, *The Large Glass* or the *Box in a Valise*. For Walter Arensburg, Duchamp collected himself, amassing what has been called the largest single collection of an artist's work to be displayed anywhere, bringing together nearly all his major works. As a precondition for donating the collection to a museum in the early Fifties, Duchamp and Arensburg required that the museum guarantee exhibition of the work for not less than twenty-five years. Only the Philadelphia Museum of Art was interested in these terms and Philadelphia is where the *oeuvre* is housed today, displayed almost exactly as Duchamp himself specified. By collecting and classifying, he countered the twentieth century penchant for collection and classification.

¹ Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (London: Da Capo, 1979), p. 41.

² Quoted in *Marcel Duchamp*, eds. Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1973), p. 258.

³ See Michael Fried, "Representing Representation: On the Central Group in Courbet's Studio," in *Allegory and Representation*, ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

⁴ Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of 'Readymades,'" in *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, edited by Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), p. 141. This passage is taken from a talk delivered by Duchamp at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Oct. 19, 1961.

⁵ Octavio Paz, *Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare*, trans. Rachel Phillips and Donald Gardner (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1990), p. 22-24.

⁶ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 52.

Translation based on the second edition of *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974, 1980). The illustrative text which supports this claim includes a photograph which more closely conforms to a standard definition of art than does (or did) Duchamp's thing, Stieglitz's photograph of Duchamp's *Fountain*. The image is saturated with gender iconography, both male and female. It was placed by Duchamp in the *The Blind Man* - itself a Duchampian enterprise in the form of an art journal (which represented the art world tendency towards representation in its critical literal?).

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 247-255. This selection, here entitled "Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics" appears in Heidegger's *What Is a Thing?* trans. W. B. Barton, Jr. and Vera Deutsch from the original *Die Frage nach dem Ding* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1962), pp. 50-83.