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A CRITICAL REASSESSMENT OF DUCHAMP'S READYMADES AND HIS ANTIAESTHETIC OF THE ORDINARY

An honors paper submitted to the Department of Art and Art History
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Alexandria M Parrish
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A Critical Reassessment of Duchamp's Readymades and his Antiaesthetic of the Ordinary

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Marcel Duchamp has been described fittingly by painter Willem de Kooning as a "one-man movement." During his lifetime Duchamp created a limited number of works that had a seemingly infinite impact on modern art. These pieces served a cognitive function, rather than a retinal one, and rejected established standards of art. His most striking, iconoclastic gesture, the readymade, has had an enormous impact on artists’ creative process for a century. By challenging even the most basic principles of visual art with his readymade sculptures, Duchamp calls into question the meaning of art, as well as the value of the aesthetic experience itself.

Duchamp began his artistic career as a painter, creating works that exhibited a heavy Impressionist influence, much in the style of other modern artists of his day. Duchamp soon turned his attention to other artists as a source of inspiration, such as Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, and began to paint in a mechanical cubist style. Even these early paintings pushed the boundaries of accepted art. In 1912 Duchamp created his first controversial work, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (fig. 1). Marcel Duchamp first expressed an inquiry into the very nature of art with this painting. The mechanical motion of the nude is depicted in a fragmented manner, reminiscent of the Cubists, and contains a sense of motion and dynamism central to the Futurist movement.

When *Nude Descending a Staircase* was displayed in New York City in what is known today as the Armory Show, the public was shocked. Nudes in fine art were usually depicted as idealized figures of beauty, and this geometric rendering of a nude

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2 Rosenthal, "Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968)". In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.
was foreign to the eyes of onlookers. Americans were both fascinated and dismayed by Duchamp’s sensational work

Duchamp's career as a painter came to an end when he turned his back completely on "retinal art," and began creating works that he felt would stimulate thought. He declared that art was as much about ideas, thus residing in the mind, as it is about the beauty of what can be seen, thus of the retina. His abandonment of painting and its focus on visual appearance is marked by his creation of readymades. This body of work represents Duchamp's most radical critique and departure from artistic tradition. Duchamp's strategic rejection of painting as a purely visual medium signified an effort to rethink historical traditions of art in theoretical terms. This new mode of thinking enabled the rediscovery of art's conceptual potential.

Readymades, by their very nature, call into question what art actually is and how art functions. Duchamp challenges and redefines the basic principles of traditional art by choosing and sometimes modifying ordinary manufactured objects and declaring them art. This act wholly removed the hand of the artist from the process of art making and offered a solution to the problem of "purely retinal art."

Duchamp's purest form of readymade sculptures was an object that was completely unaltered and remained in its original form. These simple forms of readymades included Bottle Rack, Prelude to a Broken Arm, Comb, Fountain, Trap, and

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50 cc of Paris Air. These unassisted readymades would come to be an invaluable influence on the world of art.

The first piece that Marcel Duchamp himself called a readymade, In Advance of the Broken Arm, was an ordinary snow shovel (see fig. 2). New to America, Duchamp had never seen a snow shovel that was not manufactured in France, so he purchased one and painted on the title. The title of this work is important because it provides an interpretation of the object, and it can be read as a humorous one: it implies that whoever uses the shovel will somehow break their arm while using it. Now the shovel can be seen as a potential arm-breaker, not just a shovel masquerading as an art piece.8

Bottle Rack, created in 1914, was the next readymade sculpture to come from Duchamp’s studio (see fig. 3). This work is unaltered, consisting of only a wine bottle drying rack purchased from a store. This was the first work exhibited by Duchamp that was truly ready-made, completely unchanged from its original form.

The most infamous of Duchamp's readymades was Fountain. Presented under the pseudonym R. Mutt in 1917, Fountain was a factory-produced urinal, rotated 90 degrees and then crudely signed by Duchamp with the fictitious name (see fig. 4). The sculpture was submitted to the 1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, which had claimed that they would exhibit any art piece as long as the six-dollar admissions fee was paid. The artwork submitted by "R. Mutt" was removed at the opening and did not appear for the duration of the show. Duchamp's friends formed a rowdy procession that drew attention to its rejection, and Duchamp himself even wrote an article defending Mr. Mutt in the avant-garde newsletter The Blind Man.

Trap was a simple wood and metal coatrack (see fig. 5). Duchamp submitted it to a show at the Bourgeois Art Gallery and requested that it be placed near the entryway. The piece went entirely unnoticed as art during the show. A steel dog-grooming comb entitled Comb is another of Duchamp's simple readymades (see fig. 6). It has a white inscription along the edge that reads," 3 ou 4 gouttes de hauteur n'ont rien a faire avec la sauvagerie; M.D. Feb. 17 1916 11 a.m., which translates to "Three or Four Drops of Height [or Haughtiness] Have Nothing to Do with Savagery."

50 cc of Paris Air was a glass ampoule containing air from Paris (see fig. 7). Duchamp took the ampoule to New York in 1920 and gave it to Walter Arnsberg’s as a gift. The original was broken and replaced in 1949 by Duchamp. Contrary to its title, the volume of air inside the ampoule was not actually 50 cubic centimeters, although when replicas were made in later decades, 50 cc of air was used. The original ampoule is thought to have contained around 125 cc of air. Duchamp had a pharmacist empty the ampoule, which originally contained serum, and then seal it again once air replaced its original contents. Accordingly, Duchamp attached a label with "Serum Physiologique" ("Physiological Serum") printed on it. In this state Paris Air, unlike most other readymades, is extremely fragile.

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10 Paris Air also has a clear connection to the concept of measurement; it illustrates Duchamp's toying with the standards of measurement. When reproduced on a postcard in 1937, Paris Air was identified as "Ampoule contenant 50 cc d'air de Paris." This title was mathematically inaccurate, considering the original version of Paris Air held over two times this volume of air. Typically, Duchamp embraced this inaccuracy; when issuing the edition of miniatures for the The Box in a Valise in 1941, he made sure to make them all hold 50 cc of air. However, when creating a replica of the original version in 1949 (because it had broken), Duchamp made sure to repeat the "original" size of the ampoule. This simultaneous embrace and rejection of measurement standards illustrates the duality at the center of the artist's philosophy for making art.
Assisted readymades are found objects that are altered in some way by the artist. None of the objects are handcrafted. Under this category of readymades falls the pieces *Bicycle Wheel* and *Why Not Sneeze, Rose Selavy*.

*Bicycle Wheel* was the first readymade sculpture created by Duchamp (see fig. 8). As with all of his other readymade sculptures, this work was created using ordinary objects that could be purchased commercially. This piece in particular consists of a simple wooden bar stool and a bicycle wheel. Duchamp only made one modification in the creation of the sculpture: he turned the bicycle wheel upside down and attached it to the stool. This classifies the work as an "assisted readymade," meaning that the sculpture has been modified in some way from its original form. Duchamp chose to mount the wheel of a bicycle onto an ordinary painted stool in such a way that the wheel could spin in place. He claimed that he simply enjoyed gazing at the wheel while it spun, comparing it to gazing into a fireplace. The sculpture bears some similarity to human form, resembling a neck and head on a pedestal. The piece could additionally be likened to a spinning wheel or an upside-down unicycle.11

*Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy*? was the last readymade Duchamp produced (see fig. 9). The title, inscribed on the bottom of a birdcage in black adhesive tape, poses an inscrutable question in English. It is posed to, or perhaps by, Rose Sélavy, the scandalous female alter ego Duchamp devised for himself.12 The painted metal birdcage is "assisted" by the addition white marble "sugar" cubes, a mercury thermometer, a piece of cuttlebone,

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12 This pseudonym is a pun, in French, for "Eros, such is life." It is also an anagram, since Rose and Eros are made up of the same letters.
and a tiny porcelain dish. Its full delight comes only with use, as one is surprised by the weight of the marble, expecting the lightness of sugar lumps.\(^{13}\)

*L.H.O.O.Q.* is an example of a rectified readymade. The piece consists of a postcard reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, upon which Duchamp has drawn a mustache and beard in pencil and inscribed the letters L.H.O.O.Q. (see fig. 10) The idea for this piece may have been derived from an earlier satire of *Mona Lisa* done by Eugene Bataille in 1883. Bataille's piece, *Le rire*, was an image of the iconic subject smoking a pipe (see fig. 11). As was the case with a number of his readymades, Duchamp made multiple versions of *L.H.O.O.Q.* of differing sizes and in different media throughout his career, one of which, an unmodified black and white reproduction of the Mona Lisa mounted on card, is called *L.H.O.O.Q. Shaved.*\(^{14}\)

**Readymades: Intentions and Interpretations**

Duchamp’s readymades are of enormous importance, their unquestionable significance being established by the tremendous impact they had on subsequent art, later artists, and the creative process of making art. However, it is nonetheless difficult to precisely define the nature of the readymade. Duchamp himself recognized their importance, yet interestingly also admitted that he had trouble defining them. Late in life, he stated, "I'm not at all sure that the concept of the readymade isn't the most important single idea to come out of my work." However, he also remarked "The curious thing

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about the readymade is that I've never been able to arrive at a definition or explanation that fully satisfies me."

Readymades are Non-Aesthetic

Although couched in ambiguity, there are certain points that can be made about the meaning of the readymades that that align with Duchamp’s intentions and which are consistent between interpreters. Perhaps the most important intention that Duchamp had in introducing the readymades was to undermine aesthetics. This is indicated by the criteria that he used to select the readymades, that is, he selected the pieces on the basis of "visual indifference." He believed that taste, "good" or "bad," was the "enemy of art."

Further, Duchamp famously stated in a letter written to Hans Richer in 1962 "When I discovered the readymades, I thought to discourage aesthetics…. I threw the bottle rack and the urinal in their faces as a challenge, and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty."

Duchamp’s desire to avoid taste as a criterion for selecting readymades was paramount in his important decision to limit his yearly output of readymades, making no more than twenty in his lifetime. He felt that only by limiting output, could he avoid the trap of his own taste. He further stated, "my intention was to get away from myself, though I knew perfectly well that I was using myself. Call it a little game between 'I' and 'me'."

Besides Duchamp, later interpreters have understood the readymades as works that undermine the value of the aesthetic. Calvin Tomkins believed that the readymades

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mocked seven centuries of high art. All of the skill, knowledge, and laborious effort of centuries of artists have culminated with the readymade; An object chosen specifically because there was nothing aesthetic about it, nothing that consists of art, taste, design, or formal beauty. In a similar way, Octavio Paz called attention to the readymades as works that are void of the aesthetic. He believes that Duchamp’s readymades are not anti-art, but anartistic. Donald Kuspit, in his book *The End of Art*, also understands that readymades are instances of works of art that does not have aesthetic qualities. The readymades created by Duchamp are not considered by Kuspit to be fine art, which he defines as “an expression and mediation of aesthetic experience”, but instead, are a psychosocial construction defined by its institutional identity, entertainment value, and commercial panache.

Arthur Danto in his book *After the End of Art*, discusses the non-aesthetic nature of Duchamp’s readymades by casting them in relief in relationship to the theory of Clement Greenberg, whose commitment to aesthetic experience and taste as a criterion of value in art could hardly be more complete. Danto writes “The readymade objects were seized upon by Duchamp precisely because of their aesthetic non-descriptness and he demonstrated that if they were art and not beautiful, beauty indeed could form no defining attribute of art. Danto goes on to further discuss Greenberg’s art criticism which is based on the primacy of beauty and taste, but which he considers to have

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20 Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art*. p. 84
become “extremely problematic in an art world defined by Duchamp as a generative thinker.”

William Rubin makes the point about the non-aesthetic nature of Duchamp’s readymades by comparison to a found object sculpture by Picasso. Rubin compares Duchamp's Bicycle Wheel to Pablo Picasso's Bull's Head (see fig. 12). He says that Duchamp's readymades, though some people may find them to possess interesting visual qualities, were intended as a form of communication devoid of aesthetic interest. Bull's Head, created from the union of a bicycle seat and handlebars, at first seems similar to Bicycle Wheel. Picasso's work, however, does not revolve around the epiphany of the object, but its metamorphosis by the artist. The combining of these two objects was done in the interest of plasticity, which attests more to the activity of the artist as manipulator rather than to the passive insight of the seer.

Readymades are Primarily Conceptual

Aside from undermining aesthetics, it was also Duchamp’s intention to shift the focus of art to the cerebral and away from the visual. The readymades represent Duchamp’s attempt to distance himself from “retinal art.” This idea of readymade as a product of purely mental activity is recognized by a number of later interpreters. George Hamilton, for example, refers to unassisted readymades, such as In Advance of a Broken Arm, as "brain facts." He says specifically that the brain fact is the decision of the mind to

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21 ibid p.85
Rubin claims that Duchamp may have stopped creating his readymades because some of his audiences viewed his work and decided that it did, in fact, have visual appeal
take the item out of the shop and put them down into the middle of our lives; the object (e.g. shovel or urinal) is just the outward visible embodiment of that decision. Hamilton claims that, because of this truth, every artwork has at one point been just a "brain fact." With one decision, Duchamp annihilated all of the haughty aesthetic talk and empathy for pure painting, and significant form. Art is what one decides it will be; it is not found, or made, as much as it is simply determined as art. The art has no value except for the context in which it exists in the mental event.24

Paz highlights the point that Duchamp denounced the fallacy of craft. He claims that his readymades are not works of art created by an artist, they are instead acts that accentuate the cerebral nature of the work.25 Joseph Kosuth’s opinion is similar to that of Paz and Hamilton. He claims that Duchamp's first readymade proves that it is possible to "speak another language" and still be successful in art. The unassisted readymade caused art to change its focus from the form of the language to what was being said. "This change--one from 'appearance' to 'conception'--was the beginning of 'modern' art and the beginning of conceptual art.” Here he states that all art after Duchamp is conceptual in nature because art only exists conceptually.26

Kuspit also acknowledges what he considers to be the cerebral nature of the readymades but he takes this idea one step further. Kuspit believes that the work of Duchamp signals the end of fine art.27 The reason for this belief is that, in Kuspit's view, Duchamp's methodology is not fundamentally creative; it avoids the process of making

24 George Heard Hamilton, "In Advance of Whose Broken Arm?" in Duchamp in Perspective, ed. Joseph Masheck. p. 75
26 Joseph Kosuth, Art After Philosophy, p. 30
27 Kuspit states that the work of Duchamp alongside Barnett Newman signals the end of fine art, not just Duchamp alone.
art which Kuspit believes is a transformative aesthetic experience. To him, the creative process itself is an aesthetic process, regardless of the visual outcome of this creation, i.e. "the process of making a work of art--even an abortive or non-aesthetic work of art--is itself a transformative experience."  

For Kuspit, the idea that the readymade is a product of choice, of a purely cerebral action rather than an active process of making, dovetails with the non-aesthetic nature of the readymade. By abandoning the physical process of making a work of art, Duchamp undermined the aesthetic that for Kuspit is inextricably linked to the creative process of making.

The readymades are generally thought to be works with no aesthetic properties as well as works that are the result of creativity defined as a purely cerebral process. As the products of a cerebral process their nature is in some ways more mental than physical, or at least their significance exists as much on the conceptual as on the physical plane. Additionally, as Kuspit’s insight reveals, the non-aesthetic nature and the conceptual essence of readymades are linked. If idea takes precedence over object, then aesthetic experience is undermined because it depends on sense experience. Kuspit further indicates that craft is essential to aesthetic experience, or at least essential for the production of objects that facilitate aesthetic experience. Marcel Duchamp, though he is a skilled artist who possesses a keen ability, creates works that require no skill at all: he chooses objects that are already completely finished and exhibits them. This takes all of the craft out of the art process in which it is usually present. Duchamp is essentially declaring that artists do not need to have any kind of ability to create art, and paves the

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28 Kuspit defines Duchamp's methodology as locating the creativity of the artist in the process of choice as a mental act that is independent of the process of making an art work.
29 Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art*. p.28
way for future art movements that choose to embody this ideal by creating art completely lacking in craft or skill. A person of any background or ability level could, in theory, recreate Duchamp's work, *Bottle Rack*.

Another clear indication that readymades are primarily conceptual rather than physical in nature is that they are replaceable as works of art. It was a common practice for Duchamp to replace lost original readymades by simply selecting another equivalent object, be it a urinal or a bottle rack. This underscores that the art object itself, with all of its uniquely physical qualities, is dispensable. Because *Fountain*, as well as his other readymade sculptures, were manufactured industrially and can be easily replaced if broken or lost, Duchamp calls into question the uniqueness that is attached to a work of art. Instead of creating a one-of-a-kind masterpiece, Duchamp creates readymade sculptures that can easily be reproduced because of the lack of skill needed to create them and the wide-ranging availability of the materials required. The original chosen piece is not any more significant than any other piece it is replaced with as long as the original idea remains intact. The nature of the readymade as idea, as opposed to unique object, is confirmed by the fact that Duchamp regularly replaced original lost readymades with equivalent objects chosen later.

Readymades are Ambiguous in Nature

In attempting to define the nature of the readymade, it may seem contradictory to insist upon their very ambiguity as an important and defining trait. However, to avoid this characteristic is really to miss what is an essential, and perhaps a valuable quality that they possess. Duchamp himself, as mentioned above, stated, “The curious thing about the
readymade is that I've never been able to arrive at a definition or explanation that fully satisfies me.” 30 Donald Kuspit, who in general takes a negative stand with regard to Duchamp’s art and influence, seems to appreciate, be fascinated by, and find value in the mercurial nature of the readymades. “Clearly the readymade has a double meaning. It is a conundrum, a Gordion Knot that no intellectual sword can cut. Simultaneously an art and non-art object, the readymade has no fixed identity. Regarded as art, it spontaneously reverts to non-art. It collapses into banality the moment the spectator takes it seriously as art and becomes serious art the moment the spectator dismisses it as a banal object. Just as the spectator critically reacts to it, thinking about it and looking at it in a more creative way then he think about and looks at non-art objects, it becomes one of the non-art objects.”31

Finally, though the non-aesthetic nature of readymades was what Duchamp intended and what later commentators have recognized, it remains the case that readymades have been and often are viewed as aesthetically interesting or pleasing objects. Even Walter Arensberg, Duchamp’s greatest patron and supporter, commented on the beauty of Duchamp’s Fountain by stating to George Bellows that “A lovely form has been revealed, free from its functional purpose, there a man has made an aesthetic contribution.”32 Robert Motherwell, an important abstract expressionism painter who was also a considerable scholar of contemporary art theory famously remarked that

32 Walter Arensberg purchased Duchamp’s Large Glass and left it to the Philadelphia Museum of Art along with his other extensive collection of Duchamp’s works
Duchamp’s *Bottle Rack* was “more beautiful than any sculpture created in the same year.”

One way of approaching and explaining the ambiguity of the readymade is by making reference to Duchamp’s theory of art as stated in his essay “The Creative Act.” In this essay, Duchamp recognizes that there is a gap between the artist’s intentions and the end result of the work as experienced by the spectator (and posterity). From his own experience as an artist Duchamp recognized that judging works of art is ultimately and almost exclusively the responsibility of the spectator, with the artist becoming a type of *medium* out of or through which the work is created. To put it simply, the spectator contributes to the creative process and completes the work through his or her response to it. Duchamp cannot control the way that his works are perceived: once the sculpture has left his studio, it is subject to public opinion. The viewer chooses how he or she sees the work, no matter what Duchamp's original intentions were at the time of its creation.

There is an artist-artwork-spectator relation that applies to readymades, as well as to any other art object. The artist creates the work, but the piece is not completed until the viewer sees it. The viewer can see and interpret the art object however they please, and it is irrelevant whether or not that interpretation lines up with the artist's intentions. It is in this way that some spectators chose to view the readymade sculptures from an aesthetic standpoint. Despite many definitions that critics have come up with for the readymade, there is still a level of ambiguity associated with them.

Art Conceived in Response to Readymades.

While it is impossible to provide a complete and adequate account of later works that are conceived as a response to Duchamp’s readymades, it is nevertheless instructive to consider a few examples that play off different aspects of the readymades to demonstrate the variety of ways in which later artists and art have responded to or appropriated Duchamp's singular invention of the readymade.

A known follower and admirer of Duchamp’s work, as well as an artist educated at Black Mountain College during the 1950’s, Jasper Johns’ early seminal work was based very directly on Duchamp’s readymades. In many of his early works, Jasper Johns focuses on what might be described as the ontological uncertainty of the readymades. While Johns embraces Duchamp’s use of banal objects as works of art, he presents exquisitely crafted works of art that are the products of artist skill which only have the appearance of the banal. In his sculpture entitled Painted Bronze, Johns intentionally blurs the line between the actual object and its artistic recreation (see fig. 13). At first the sculpture appears to be a readymade object, like those of Duchamp, as the handcrafted appearance of the cans is only apparent after close inspection. The original beer cans were a deep brass-colored metal, which was ideal for casting in bronze to achieve an effective trompe l’oeil effect. However, in contrast to the authentic appearance of the cast cans, he allowed his brushstrokes to remain visible in the painted labels, creating an imperfection visible only upon careful observation.

The Aestheticized Objects of Robert Rauschenberg

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35 Ontology is the philosophical study of the nature of being, becoming, existence, or reality, as well as the basic categories of being and their relations.
Robert Rauschenberg drew on the blending of art and everyday life that he saw in Duchamp's readymades, but chose to bring an element of aesthetics into his work. His Combine series are neither paintings nor sculptures, but a hybrid of the two art forms. By 1954, Rauschenberg had begun to incorporate found objects, such as photographs, prints, or newspaper clippings into the structure of his canvas. He eventually escalated to integrating three-dimensional objects into his pieces, such as in *Bed* and in *Monogram*, two of his most notable combine paintings (see figs. 14 & 15). *Bed*, completed in 1955, included a pillow and quilt that had paint splashed overtop of them in an abstract expressionist manner.

While *Bed* incorporated the artist’s actual bed, the bed was elevated to the level of art by Rauschenberg’s considerable skill as an artist grounded in the formalistic approach of Abstract Expressionist style that preceded him. *Monogram*, arguably the most notorious of the combine paintings, consisted of a stuffed angora goat with a tire circling its midsection, all on top of a collaged and painted horizontal canvas base. In discussing the creation of *Monogram* in an interview, Rauschenberg mentioned that it was necessary to place the support on the floor rather than on the wall because the angora goat’s identity as a stuffed animal was too evident. The goat didn’t lose its object identity until the work was placed on the ground. Rauschenberg's combine paintings incorporate the Duchampian element of found objects, but place them in a more deliberate, artistic setting.

**Conceptual Art of Joseph Kosuth**

Joseph Kosuth's art exhibits a strong influence of Duchamp's readymades by stressing the conceptual nature of the art work. His most famous series of *One and Three*
installations explores the relationship between ideas and the images and words used to convey them. In these installations, Kousuth assembled an object, a photograph of that object, and an enlarged photographic copy of the dictionary definition of the object. *One and Three Chairs* is one such conceptual work (fig 16). Kousuth himself said this about the series, "I used common, functional objects - such as a chair - and to the left of the object would be a full-scale photograph of it and to the right of the object would be a photostat of a definition of the object from the dictionary. Everything you saw when you looked at the object had to be the same that you saw in the photograph, so each time the work was exhibited the new installation necessitated a new photograph. I liked that the work itself was something other than simply what you saw. By changing the location, the object, the photograph and still having it remain the same work was very interesting. It meant you could have an art work which was that idea of an art work, and its formal components weren't important."

Object-Oriented Sculptures of Andy Goldsworthy

Andy Goldsworthy is a notable artist who creates sculpture out of found materials. The focus in his work is not conceptual, but object-oriented. Goldsworthy utilizes ordinary objects of nature that he finds outdoors. His art, unlike that of the readymades, brings back the importance of craft and craftsmanship, while still possessing the replicability seen in Duchamp’s sculptures. Many of Goldsworthy’s creations are not meant to be permanent: he uses natural objects and leaves his work exposed to the elements of nature, fully expecting the sculpture to eventually be destroyed, be it by wind, rain, time, or by human interference. The objects used in the actual sculpture are common

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and replaceable, such as leaves or rocks, and usually wouldn’t warrant a second glance from passersby. When these objects are presented in a new context or arrangement, as seen in the work *Woven branch circular arch* (fig. 17) these ordinary objects together are seen as astonishing works of art.\(^37\)

The Nature and Value of Aesthetic Experience

Although the nature of what constitutes aesthetic experience has been described in many ways, to the extent that any complete discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper, any serious discussion of Duchamp’s readymades and their influence on later art necessarily must engage this topic in some way. The value of aesthetic experience must be described, as must the value of Duchamp’s non-aesthetic approach to art.

The first scholarly attempts to define the aesthetic began during the height of rationalism in Western philosophy. The German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten is generally considered to be the originator of the term aesthetic, which he coined in his work entitled *Reflections of Poetry* (1735). Although he himself was a follower of the rationalism of Decartes and Leibnitz, Baumgarten felt that to exclude perceptions and sensations from the realm of knowledge, perhaps because they are less inherently subject to rationalistic clarity, is to severely impoverish human cognition. Baumgarten borrowed the Greek word for perception, *aesthesia*, to describe a way of knowing reality that depends on sense experience, rather than discounting such experience as unreliable, as is the case in pure rationalist discourse.\(^38\) Baumgarten concluded that the aesthetic value of

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a work of art depended on its ability to produce vivid experiences in its audiences.\textsuperscript{39}

Following Baumgarten’s emphasis on aesthetic experience as a legitimate way of knowing, Frederich von Schiller, a poet, playwright and art theorist of the Romantic period, celebrated the importance of the aesthetic in his book \textit{On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters.”} In this work, Schiller insists not only on the importance of aesthetic experience, but also on its primacy. For Schiller, real education should begin with aesthetic education that alone is capable of reconciling the conceptual with the perceptual.\textsuperscript{40}

At the beginning of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a German philosopher, further defines the nature of the aesthetic as a type of experience that reconciles opposition between the conceptual and the perceptual. In his book \textit{Aesthetics} (1834), Hegel writes that “art has the function of revealing truth in the form of sensuous artistic shapes and of presenting to us the reconciliation of the contradiction between sense and reason, between what is and what ought to be, between desire and duty.” \textsuperscript{41}

Out of this tradition, formalism develops as an artistic philosophy particularly in the writings of Walter Pater and Rogier Fry. For both Pater and Fry, aesthetic experience was not just an aspect of the artistic experience but constituted the essence of it. Perhaps the single most important characteristic of the aesthetic for Pater and a host of other thinkers was that aesthetic experience was valuable because it reconciled and synthetically unified the intellectual and the sensual aspects of human cognition. For

\begin{footnotes}
\item[41] Donald Kuspit, \textit{The End of Art}. p 34.
\end{footnotes}
Pater, aesthetic beauty transcends the distinction between “the abstract and the concrete, the intellectual and the sensual.”

What all these thinkers seem to share is the idea that aesthetic experience is valuable because it reconciles the intellectual with the sensual. Following up on this tradition the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi postulates aesthetic experience as valuable because it satisfies the intellectual need to grasp that which is actually real; it was a form of understanding. The enjoyment derived from aesthetic encounters might be explained in part by the satisfaction of a generalized human need for knowledge and understanding that the arts provide. The experience one has in front of a great work of art is pleasurable because there is a great amount of knowledge about the world held within the exchange between the art and the viewer. What is ordinarily recognized as an aesthetic experience can also be classified as a cognitive rush. Further, for Csikszentmihalyi, aesthetic experience parallels what he has argued is optimal human experience that he has defined as “flow.” The elements of aesthetic experience as defined by Monroe Beardsley that mirror the experience of flow are (1) object focus: the person willingly invests attention in a visual stimulus; (2) felt freedom: he or she feels a sense of harmony that preempts everyday concerns and is experienced as freedom; (3) detached affect: the experience is not taken literally, so that the aesthetic presentation of a disaster might move the viewer to reflection but not to panic; (4) active discovery: the person becomes cognitively involved in the challenges presented by the stimulus and derives a

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42 Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art*, p. 32.
sense of exhilaration from the involvement; (5) wholeness: a sense of integration follows from the experience, giving the person a feeling of self-acceptance and self-expansion. For Csikszentmihalyi, flow experience occurs when people are deeply involved in activities with few or no external reward-activities such as playing chess, mountain climbing, or composing music. People participate in such “nonproductive” activities because they enjoy the activity itself rather than seeking a reward at the conclusion of such activity. The experience of the activity itself becomes its own reward. One such flow experience that contains its goal in itself is also referred to as an autotelic experience. It is often called flow because respondents frequently used the term to describe the deep involvement and effortless progression of the activity.

Philosophers who describe the elements of the aesthetic experience and psychologists describing flow are both essentially talking about the same state of mind. This can be interpreted to mean that humans generally enjoy experiences that are clearer and more focused than everyday life. When this heightened state of consciousness occurs in response to music, painting, and other art forms, it is referred to as an aesthetic experience. In other aspects, such as sports, hobbies, challenging work, and social interactions, this same heightened state of consciousness is called a flow experience.

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46 This conclusion has previously been drawn by a 1934 study by John Dewey
The Value of Duchamp’s Non-Aesthetic Approach to Art

Many thinkers have argued convincingly for the value of aesthetic experience and thus the idea of dispensing with it as Duchamp did is clearly not a productive one from this perspective. However, as Danto points out, there is a case to be made for Duchamp’s undermining of the idea of the aesthetic. For Danto, the emphasis on the aesthetic as the most important or perhaps the only important value in art was too restrictive. Duchamp’s contribution was to widen the definition of what art could be and might potentially say. Duchamp liberated art by showing the potential of art that does not have aesthetics as its primary focus. 48

The influence that Duchamp’s art and particularly his readymades have had on contemporary art is demonstrative of their relevance to the expressive needs of the modern and contemporary artists that came after him. The value of provocative art objects, the readymades, is ultimately that they clearly elicit discussions about the nature and purpose of art. Not only do they broaden the range of possibilities that art has but also, paradoxically, call attention to the nature of the aesthetic experience itself and in so doing help to more clearly define it and lead to a recognition of its value as one of art’s most important possible functions.

48 Arthur Danto, After the End of Art. p 84-89.
Figure 1
Marcel Duchamp
*Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*
1912
Oil on Canvas
147 x 89.2 cm (57 7/8 x 35 1/8"
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia
Figure 2
Marcel Duchamp
In Advance of the Broken Arm
1964 (fourth version after lost original of 1915)
Wood and galvanized-iron snow shovel
52" (132 cm) high
Museum of Modern Art, New York

Figure 3
Bottle Rack
1963 (replica of 1914 original)
Galvanized iron bottle rack
19 5/8 x 16 1/8 inches (49.8 x 41 cm)
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia
Figure 4
Marcel Duchamp
Fountain
1964 (fourth version after lost original of 1917)
Glazed ceramic urinal with black paint
15 x19 1/4 x 24 5/8” (38.1 cm x 48.9 cm x 62.55 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco

Figure 5
Marcel Duchamp
Trap
1964 (replica of 1917 original)
19x100x13 cm
Centre Pompidou, Paris
Figure 6
Marcel Duchamp

*Comb*

Steel dog-grooming comb
16.6 x 3 x 0.3 cm
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia
The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection

Figure 7
Marcel Duchamp

*50cc of Paris Air*
1919

Glass ampoule (broken and later restored)
5 ¼” (13.3cm)
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia
The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection
Figure 8
Marcel Duchamp
*Bicycle Wheel*
1951 (third version after lost original of 1913)
Metal wheel mounted on painted wood stool
51 x 25 x 16 1/2" (129.5 x 63.5 x 41.9 cm)
Museum of Modern Art
Figure 9
Marcel Duchamp
*Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy?*
1964 (replica of 1921 original)
Painted metal birdcage containing marble blocks, thermometer, and piece of cuttlebone
4 7/8 x 8 3/4 x 6 3/8" (12.3 x 22.1 x 16 cm)
Museum of Modern Art, New York
Figure 10
Marcel Duchamp
*L.H.O.O.Q.*
1919
Pencil on reproduction of Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*
19.7 x 12.4 cm
Private collection

Figure 11
Eugene Bataille
*Le Rire (The Laugh)*
1883
Illustration in the book *Coquelin Cadet, 2nd edition*, ed. 1887
Figure 12
Pablo Picasso
*Bull’s Head*
1942
Bicycle seat and handlebars
33.5 x 43.5 x 19 cm.
Picasso Museum, Paris

Figure 13
Jasper Johns
*Painted Bronze (Ballantine Ale)*
1960
Painted bronze
5 1/2 x 8 x 4 3/4"  
Kunstmuseum Basel
Figure 14
Robert Rauschenberg
Bed
1955
Oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and sheet on wood supports
6' 3 1/4" x 31 1/2" x 8" (191.1 x 80 x 20.3 cm)
Figure 15
Robert Rauschenberg
*Monogram*
1959
Mixed media with taxidermy goat, rubber tire and tennis ball
4 x 6 x 6’
Moderna Museet, Stockholm
Figure 16
Joseph Kosuth
One and Three Chairs
1965
Wooden folding chair and mounted photographs
Chair 32 3/8 x 14 7/8 x 20 7/8" (82 x 37.8 x 53 cm), photographic panel 36 x 24 1/8" (91.5 x 61.1 cm), text panel 24 x 24 1/8" (61 x 61.3 cm)
Museum of Modern Art, New York

Figure 17
Andy Goldsworthy
April 1986
Woven branch circular arch
Langholm, Dumfriesshire
Bibliography


