

READY-MADE

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It.,Fr., Germ., Span. *Ready-made*. Marcel Duchamp, who coined "ready-made" in 1915, declared that he preferred the use of the English term. The expression "ready-made" refers to an object "already done", in some cases a serial object, chosen and moved both from its physical context and its ordinary environment, from its usual logical and semantic context. Moving from the physical context consists in dislocating the object, or the manufactured article, isolating it and modifying its usual position. The shift from the logical and semantic context is accomplished by giving the object another name, or by inscribing on it a sentence that has no relation to it. This introduces a break in the referentiality of the linguistic sign, that is, a break between image and language, in which the meaning of the object is given by the uniqueness of the situation in which it is found.

The term "ready-made" was coined by Marcel Duchamp in 1915, after his arrival in New York, to indicate some of his previous artistic operations in Neuilly (*Roue de bicyclette*, 1913), in Paris (*Égouttoir*, 1914), in Rouen (*Pharmacie*, 1914). Once in New York he continued to work with greater perspicuity on these operations, creating other ready-mades such as: *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915), *With Idden Noise* (1916), *Comb* (1916), *Apolinère Enameled* (1917), *Fountain* (1917), *Porte-chapeaux* (1917), *Trébuchet* (1917).

Returned back to Paris, in 1919, Duchamp made other ready-mades: *LHOOQ* (the title should be read as it is pronounced: "Elle a chaud au cul"), *Air de Paris*, *Chèque Tzanck*. Finally, on his return to New York in 1920, in the guise of his female alter ego Rose Sélavy (Er-rose, Eros c'est la vie, with the double "r" of arrose), Duchamp created two more ready-mades: *Fresh Widow* and *Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy?*

Duchamp's ready-mades are distinguished in: *ready-made aided* (the object is only repositioned in space); *ready-made corrected or assisted* (the object is changed with small interventions); *reciprocal ready-made* ("to use a Rembrandt as an ironing board"); *ready-made imitated and rectified* (the object is repeated with corrections); *semi-ready-made assembled* (the object is an assemblage of modified ready-made); *ready-made printed and modified* (the printed object is modified with small interventions).

According to Duchamp, the ready-made is the result of the artist's choice once she has reached a state of *absolute indifference* towards the object, after she has reached the condition of complete lack of interest in

it. Hence, the object is no longer perceived through the retinal vision, either by the artist or later from the public. Once this state of indifference has been reached, in which the ready-made elements meet randomly, the chosen and modified artefact is no longer an object of contemplation: it cannot be identified as an ordinary object, to the point that there is no aesthetic emotion for it. In this way, the ready-made object passes from the mental domain of the artist to that of the spectator, through the spatial repositioning and the linguistic nominalism that accompanies it, but not through the retinal seduction (see Menna 1975). Duchamp emphasizes that the artistic operation does not end with the artist's action, but must be completed by the spectator in a sort of *rendezvous* between the choice made in the state of aesthetic indifference and the determined space-time. The neutralization of the retinal sight operated by the ready-made marks the end of the artistic contemplation regime and the definitive detachment from both the physical act of painting and the notion of picture. Moreover, the *neutralization* of the retinal sight is one with the neutralization of taste and description; in this way the ready-made is conceived as an *unintentional machine*. The ready-made operation enters the field of the mental, setting free the object from the *retinal appearance*, and freeing it in its indifferent materiality (beauty of indifference: *apparition*).

Duchamp's question ("Can works be done that are not art?") would find an answer in the ready-made's visual indifference coupled with the total absence of taste judgment. This condition presupposes a limited production of ready-mades, otherwise the operation will fall back into the traditional art of reified work ("Repetition is the great enemy of art", as Duchamp said). Another operation that answers this question derives from the action of *reciprocal ready-made*: it is the space of transit between the removal from the physical act of painting and the opening of mental space that allows the freeing from the painting itself. This mental space is conceived by Duchamp as a *game space*. "Using a Rembrandt as an ironing board" means transiting art into not-art (recognizing that there is always something readymade in every painting: brushes, colours, canvases. Reciprocally, this action would allow the passage from not-art towards an art that has freed itself from the mere retinal vision, a gesture accomplished with *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (1912-1923). Freeing oneself from the appearance of the work of art through neutralization, indifference and help, radically changed the sense of artistic work: however, this new point of view does not amount to a radical anti-artistic proposal, but a kind of artistic production able to reduce the limits between art and not-art; a practice that opposes the traditional conception of art, thus paving the way to a new relationship between art and life based on the *apparition of a work that is not art*.

The first traces of criticism towards Duchamp can be seen in the misunderstanding of his painting by Apollinaire (1913), who indicated him as the one able to reconcile art with the people, as an artist freed from the aesthetic preoccupations of the time. Duchamp (1967) considered this judgment absurd, arguing that he had no interest in communicating with an audience. Later on, in 1918, Apollinaire criticized the choice of the Society of Independent Artists who refused to exhibit *Fountain*, judging it as obscene and not artistic. On that occasion, Apollinaire defended the role of imagination and the right to exhibit a work that was nevertheless a purely aesthetic object placed in a new context of meaning. Even Breton (1934) took this partial aspect of ready-mades calling them "objets manufacturés promus à la dignité d'objets d'art par le choix de l'artiste". Breton explained the de-contextualization as a renewed artistic gesture based on

a mental and linguistic operation, in line with his artistic conception of the surrealist avant-garde aimed at provoking “une révolution totale de l’objet... qui entraîne la requalification par le choix” (1936). Despite the profound influence of Duchamp on the United States’ artistic scene (*Armory Show, Art of this Century* and *Société Anonyme*), in 1959, with the release of the essay by Robert Lebel, the critical debate on his work focused on the relationship between art and life, and between the artist and the work of art. The debate also continued through lucid interviews that Duchamp granted to Alain Jouffroy and Pierre Cabanne, at a time when Duchamp was better known and influential in the United States than in Europe (Rauschenberg, Johns, Cage and Tinguely). In 1964, the Galleria Arturo Schwarz in Milan proposed a large exhibition of ready-made multiples followed by the publication of the entire Duchamp production catalogue (1969). In Schwarz’s critical analyses, the importance of using word games and their sonority was emphasized to complete the definition of ready-mades. For Schwarz, the concept of game was closely related to the beauty of indifference in view of a nominalistic conception of the alchemical matrix of not-art.

Octavio Paz (1973) stressed that ready-made is a radical critique of retinal art when proposing, with humour and irony and in the form of dialectical game, an empty object. This *empty object* comes to life in a dialectical game: its negation is a profanation that goes beyond its neutrality, to reach a degree of *purity of gesture* through the rendezvous. In this sense Paz speaks of nihilism that contradicts itself, inasmuch as it denies itself in the act of exposing the void. Also Jean Clair (1975, 1977, 2000) returns to Duchamp’s work in a Neoplatonic interpretative key. Rejecting Paz’s idea of purity of gesture, as well as mystical and alchemical interpretations, Clair interprets Duchamp as a Neoplatonic on the basis of his researches on the fourth dimension and the perspective inspired by Gaston de Pawlowski (*Voyage au Pays de la Quatrième Dimension*, 1912). Ready-mades are a step towards *Large Glass* (1993) according to the idea that every three-dimensional shape is the projection of an elusive four-dimensional object.

The position of Rosalind Krauss is opposed to this conception of art. Starting from the unintentional character of Duchamp’s action, Krauss defines it as a mechanical switch that triggers impersonal processes whose purpose is not to make art, but to ask questions. The object-work is seen as a question that interrogates the enigma of how and why something becomes a work of art (1981). On one side, Krauss rejects the alchemical and Neoplatonic interpretations that understand Duchamp’s actions as an *art of the idea* while, on the other side, she maintains that his artistic gesture consists in the act of aesthetic transformation that deconstructs immediate sensitive perception (1986). Duchamp does not produce works in the Platonic sense of the *fall of ideas* in the physical forms, but promotes a realism of the *silent presence* in which the status of immediacy of the ready-made makes it a *lonely object* in its physicality, an object perceived in a *snapshot effect* which makes it enter into what Krauss calls the idea of *photographic* (1990). Grounding on Lyotard (1977), Krauss rethink the antiretinal attitude by criticizing the ideal vision of a disembodied reality. In Duchamp there is a physiological embodied optics that read the rendezvous with the object as the instant of sight in the carnal conjunction. In this way the visual language, opened by the ready-made, becomes a realistic physics of sight, which will have its fulfilment in the *Large Glass* (1993).

Recently, Boris Groys (2008) returned to discuss the concept of ready-made through the notion of *object-paradox*. The object-paradox is a work of art and is not a work of art. It is the artistic embodiment of self-

contradiction which in turn requires a contradictory and paradoxical reaction from the public and the critics. The specific reaction is that of an object-paradox able to act as critical and self-critical goods. The work-goods, capable of appropriating the iconoclastic gesture, transforms it into a new way of making art, an art that places itself in a *difference beyond the difference*. Such an iconoclastic position produces an art that presents itself as, at the same time, an *immediate image* and a *critique of the image*. An example is precisely the ready-made as *object-difference beyond the difference*: a difference in the life expectancy of the object over time once it is placed in a specific context. In this sense, both George Dickie's and Arthur Danto's analyses (respectively, 1974 and 1981) question the meaning of art theory and the act of conferring artistry to interpret the artistic value of the ready-made.

Still referring to the paradoxical figure, Paolo D'Angelo (2014) emphasized how Duchamp's anti-art is, in fact, an art form. By denying being art, the ready-made becomes paradoxically art, because this is an attack on traditional art: the ready-made is what it is because there are traditional works of art. According to D'Angelo, this paradox is inscribed in the contemporary project of an art without art, an art that seeks a formless form. But this artistic research, which began with Duchamp, is a mode of action that art has always had, namely the ability to play with the rules going beyond the rules.

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