



## Article

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## Abstract

This article considers the notion of 'play' in the plastic arts, its relation to the materiality of the art object, and the way in which such a conception relied on a notion of aesthetic order broke down in the wake of Marcel Duchamp. I argue that Duchamp's readymades force a re-evaluation of artistic 'play'. It is further argued that Duchamp achieved this by employing strategies of disguise in order to trade on an epistemic play of surfaces, revealing the contingency of knowledge and identity.

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# Duchamp's Wager: Disguise, the Play of Surface and Disorder

*John Scanlan*

## ABSTRACT

This article considers the notion of 'play' in the plastic arts as described by Johan Huizinga, its definitional relation to the materiality of the art object, and the way in which such a conception rests on a notion of aesthetic order that, after the work of Marcel Duchamp, could not be sustained. I argue that Duchamp's readymades force a re-evaluation of plasticity (and thus of Huizinga's definition of play), and introduce a permanent revolution of plasticity, which in social and intellectual terms must be considered as the expression of an essential disorder underlying all appearances. It is further argued that Duchamp achieved this by employing strategies of disguise in order to lay bare the epistemic play of surfaces, and thus the contingency of knowledge and identity. Duchamp's wager was that changing fashions in art revealed that it was neither formal presentation nor skill that defined art, but rather some connection to a hidden realm of disorder, and that this connection could be found, and repeatedly renewed, by ensuring that the art 'object' was received as an uncertain bequest.

*Key words:* disorder, Marcel Duchamp, play, identity

## Duchamp's Wager: Disguise, the Play of Surface and Disorder

*John Scanlan*

Precision Oculism. Rose Sélavy. New York-Paris.  
Complete Line of Whiskers and Kicks.

*Calling card for Rose Sélavy*

### PLAY AND PLASTICITY

In the early twentieth century the principles that had underpinned most avant-garde Western art since the early nineteenth century seemed yet to have an impact on (or could still be ignored in) the work of some influential but more classically directed scholars who developed connections between aesthetics and cultures of play. Whilst Friedrich Schiller, in his letters on aesthetics, had insisted on the importance of the 'play-drive' in liberating beauty and aesthetic response from formal constraints, others played down the autonomy this granted the imagination.<sup>1</sup> In *Homo Ludens*, his study of the play element in culture (originally published in 1938), Johan Huizinga drew a sharp distinction between poetry, music and dance on the one hand, and the plastic arts – painting and sculpture – on the other.<sup>2</sup> Huizinga observed that the dependence of the plastic arts on matter – clay, paint, canvas – accounted for the difficulty in identifying this sphere of artistic activity with what he called 'free play,' meaning an activity that was without any external goal, or that was not limited by any external or material constraints. Painters and

sculptors, he believed, were denied lasting access to the play impulse because, unlike the poet or musician, they were required – limited – by the medium:

To fix a certain aesthetic impulse in matter by means of diligent and painstaking labour [...the artist's] inspiration may be free and vehement when he 'conceives,' but in its execution, it is always subjected to the skill and proficiency of the forming hand (Huizinga, 1955: 166).

The point Huizinga was making was that once an object is fixed – made material – it is effectively captured in time and space, purely as a consequence of its materiality, and so fully present to the senses and incapable of realising a fluidity of expression found in the other arts. Thus 'where there is no visible action' – in finished painting and sculpture – 'there can be no play' (Huizinga, 1955: 166). The object of plastic creation as realised therefore brings to an end the indeterminate motion of play that is found in artistic creation.

In general terms, and where it is apparent, play manifests a challenge to our capacity for definition, and it makes difficult the postulation of identity simply because play cannot be viewed or understood in terms of objective intentions (although we are usually able to recognize it just as this thing 'play,' the generalization of which merely suggests the incipient disorder of a non-specific or residual categorization – as in 'I wasn't doing *anything*, just playing'). And it is appropriate that play to order is, as Huizinga noted, no longer play, but instead becomes a rule-bound game; we learn to 'play' musical instruments, for example, by observing the *rules* of musical theory.

The curious thing about these perceptions of play, and of the role of play in the plastic arts (and the explanation of why these constitute my point of departure here) is that this view was still expressed towards the middle of the twentieth century. By the time *Homo Ludens* was published it had largely been forgotten that over twenty years before, in the period just before the outbreak of the First World

War, a revolution in the plastic arts had taken place, one that I suggest forces a reconsideration of this idea of the absence of the play element in 'plastic art.' Instead, as I argue, the 'plastic' in art would come to encompass a non-material – i.e., ludic or aleatory – element that was absent in Huizinga's definition of the term, and that would draw on nineteenth century traditions originating with thinkers like Schiller.<sup>3</sup>

#### INFLUX OF MIND

The artist Marcel Duchamp had already moved through a variety of styles between the start of the century and the moment in 1912 when he abandoned painting, and perhaps reflecting his lack of impact as a conventional painter as much as his unease with the limitations of the form, he made the crucial decision to look for other means of exploring his ideas (De Duve, 1991a).<sup>4</sup> 'Marcel,' he wrote in a note to himself in 1912, 'no more painting' (Sanouillet and Peterson, 1973: 133). Duchamp's 'shipwrecked' artist as the pure individual – no schools, and no social or personal limits – stood in stark contrast to all that went before him; to every '-ism' that hitherto had sought to constitute a renewed modernism (Tomkins, 1998: 84).

In the light of his relative obscurity when he gave up painting, it is remarkable that within the space of ten years, Duchamp would have produced the series of objects that turned the art world upside down – although this was very much a delayed effect – leaving a body of work that contradicted and shocked the expectations of the art world, and that would see him cajole twentieth-century art into the realm of play, that Huizinga (writing in 1938), employing a notion of plasticity as formal constraint, believed it could not inhabit. A most important point to note in this conception of play – and the point of entry for the example of Duchamp – is the role that an *idea* may occupy in the domain of play: 'play only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable,' Huizinga had said, 'when an influx of *mind*

breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos' (Huizinga, 1955: 3). That is to say, play is not material, it cannot be realized in painting, in material objectivity generally, because in its fluidity play 'bursts the bounds of the physically existent,' and so only has significance as an interlude from what we might call the determinate motion of life, which is to say, the meeting of needs, and the undertaking of work for definite, usually rational, ends – or indeed applying paint to canvas to create art (Huizinga, 1955: 4-5). Equally, the influx of mind, one may suggest, is entirely without content in the sense that it bypasses such ends and is thus identifiable as simply the decision to suspend normal modes of activity, performativity, or expectation.

I want to suggest that Duchamp consciously employed disguise as a mode of play because he saw the pretence of masking his identity as analogical to a double-dealing art world (a world where taste could be determined by committee), and that the means of coming to terms with this duplicity was through selective strategies of masking and unmasking. By playing hide and seek with the art world, he was able to show how seriously entrenched tradition was, not to mention how utterly successful it was in the appropriation of the avant-gardes. The consequence of this was a re-evaluation, through his *readymades*, of the determinate means of painting as a medium, and this extended generally to a doubting of the idea that an artist working in the visual field had to employ plastic means (as conventionally understood) at all.<sup>5</sup>

This idea can be conveyed in one statement – that being an artist is not about painting, not about the medium or the skill of the forming hand, but rather about choosing, or differentiating, from within the world of objects and transferring what is taken, in a kind of abduction, to a new context where it may be considered in a different way. This was the influx of *mind*, which – to restate Huizinga's *active* condition of play – fundamentally upset the artistic cosmos. The gap in meaning, in presentation, left by this manoeuvre inaugurates an aspect of play that is then

transferred to the viewer, who then confronts a number of apparent discrepancies: between surface and depth, between appearance and the context of sensible experience, and so on.

In the readymades – everyday objects that were taken out of context and declared to be 'art,' the viewer (and thus the status of the object) are caught between possibility and actuality, something and nothing. It is not always accurate to describe the readymades as 'objects' without confusing matters (a point I will return to later), but these items found *already made*, only became 'readymades,' according to Duchamp, as a condition of their contingency both *in* and *as* a kind of 'rendezvous.' In the former case, this was as a meeting of the idea of the readymade and the designated object – that is, in finding/choosing the object, and in the latter case as 'being subject to all kinds of delays' – which one presumes is the delay that intervenes after Duchamp's choice and prior to the determination of the objective meaning of the item to, say, a viewer, as Duchamp noted in this well-known 'specification' for the readymade:

Specifications for 'Readymades': by planning for a moment to come (on such a day, such a date such a minute), '*to inscribe* a readymade' – The ready made can later be looked for. – (with all kinds of delays). The important thing then is just this matter of timing, this snapshot effect [...] It is a kind of rendezvous (*sic*) (Sanouillet and Peterson, 1973: 32).

The readymade can be seen as a wager, and this note identifies the moment when Duchamp brings his part of the play to an end – by the act of differentiation, choice (or whatever we might call it: this *snapshot effect*). A highly contentious aspect of this notion of making or creating art was in the role it gave to an unknown public (as compared to the expert role normally assumed by figures within the art world).



In an interview with Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp explained his perception of how this wager may come to some resolution:

The artist makes something, then one day, he is recognized by the intervention of the public, of the spectator [...] you can't stop that, because in brief it's the product of two poles – there's the one pole of the one who makes the work, and the pole of the one who looks at it. I give the latter as much importance as the one who makes it (Cabanne, 1971: 70).

Duchamp's 'delays' can also be understood in terms of the time it takes for these two poles to meet, with the unknown arrival of the viewing eye leaving an essential tension hanging over the question of meaning.<sup>8</sup> This tension might not be evident in the 'visible action' of some phenomena (as, for example, with the performance of dance) but the anxiety produced by these readymades was enough, as we shall see, to prevent the establishment of a fixed, or stable meaning regarding the status of the work within the tradition into which it was cast. As Octavio Paz has said, the readymades seemed by turns baffling and dangerous; they saw Duchamp 'juggling with knives,' and succeeding, he believes:

Because, in the end, the gesture is a philosophical or, rather dialectical game more than an artistic operation: it is a negation which, through humour, becomes affirmation. Suspended by irony, in a state of perpetual oscillation, this affirmation is always provisional (Paz, 1970: 17).

The effect of the readymade was to remove the frame – the frame of reference, as well as the actual physical boundaries of a frame that separates a canvas from the context in which it hangs, a separation that sees the playfulness of artistic creativity terminate with the object itself, bound and finitely given within space and time. As Thierry de Duve has said, 'in front of a readymade there is no longer any technical

difference between making art and appreciating it' (De Duve, 1996: 290). The removal of framing devices became the condition for the readymade and the realization that with it came also the denial of aesthetic expectations and hierarchies. In short the *unframing* is the introduction of disorder as an element of the play of surfaces. Nevertheless, by the time Johan Huizinga's thoughts on play were published in *Homo Ludens* Duchamp was largely forgotten within the art world, a situation that left the laconic outsider apparently unconcerned: he was more determined to become a chess champion than to remain an artist. His star was not to rise again until the likes of John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns attained prominence in the 1960's, citing Duchamp as an important influence. As the consequence of another – rather different – delay, however, his status as the father of conceptual art would be sealed by the end of the twentieth century, along with his reputation as the master prankster of modern art, its devil in disguise, a reputation that derives, chiefly, from one particularly puzzling bequest.

#### THE OBJECT IN THE WRONG PLACE

For a long time, modernist and avant-garde art had been shocking and iconoclastic in its presentation (Compagnon, 1994; Phillipson, 1985; Watts, 1980). In large part the shock effect accompanied the presentation of something familiar within a new context, or in a new form. For example, Manet's two most infamous paintings, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* and *Olympia* were both greeted with disapproval partly because of the de-contextualizing of archetypes (in these two cases the female nude), but also in respect of the upsetting of formal presentation (Manet used painterly devices to highlight the work's artifice that shocked the viewer into attention) (Compagnon, 1994; Jay, 1993). The archetypal nude, for example, carried with it a history of depiction that regulated the aesthetic conditions for understanding the presentation of the form itself; it was considered unacceptable, for moral reasons



1. *Fountain*, ('R. Mutt') Marcel Duchamp, 1917. Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz.

and because of the suggestion of impropriety, to have clothed male figures presented alongside the nude figure of a female as Manet had depicted.

So, the upsetting of expectations was in many ways nothing new. However, Marcel Duchamp's 1917 piece *Fountain* went several steps further than any previous shock gestures. This 'sculpture,' as it was sometimes referred to at the time, was not actually a fountain, but rather an upturned urinal – a mass-produced piece of bathroom equipment. It was neither sculpture nor painting. The significance of the de-contextualized urinal was found in the impact it made on questions of representation, and in issues it raised regarding the contextual limits on the meaning

of a work of art. With *Fountain* this becomes so pronounced that identification between a work of art and the world need no longer bother an artist at all. Contrast this with the situation *prior* to the Readymade, to the other modernist innovations we are familiar with – impressionism, fauvism, or cubism for example, all of which, as Jerrold Seigel suggests, 'had been undertaken for some aesthetic purpose, to expand art's subject matter, extend its expressive range, or heighten its perceptual power' (Seigel, 1995: 115).

By contrast Duchamp saw artistic conventions as a succession of disguises; this year's fashion in painting was simply the empirically given surface which could charm, or transform, the essential disorder that lay beyond these limits and conventions. In effect the representation was a stylistic convention, a disguise concealing a deeper ambiguity regarding objects of presentation and questions of mediation. Duchamp regarded modernism as evidence of this essential lack of depth, and so where other 'schools' were concerned with the development of modernist self-criticism as a mode of expression, Duchamp could not fit into this ideal. He saw himself, in his own words, 'shipwrecked,' alone – he was no longer interested in expanding the form of painting, yet having been a painter he was still concerned with what he regarded to be the limitations imposed by stylistic conventions, or personal habits, and these were just some of the reasons he gave up painting (one suspects equal amounts of boredom and impatience). Another reason was that he considered artistic freedom in more radical terms than had hitherto been expressed in modernity: as absolute freedom from any social or personal demands. This was the absolute isolation of the apostate – once inside, now apart, condemned by conscience to be forever set against the very milieu that provided grounds for the substance of the disagreement. Duchamp pursued this absolute freedom by developing a peculiar indifference to the art world around him, and this was expressed as a desire not to have to make art out of any professional duty, or even aesthetic impulse (impulses which could be denied), and this also explains

why for the majority of his life he earned his living through a variety of occupations and endeavours (giving French language tuition, dealing in art) but not through making art. 'There are two kinds of artists,' he said: 'the artist that deals with society, is integrated into society; and the other artist, the completely freelance artist, who has no obligations' (Sanouillet and Petersen, 1973: 133). He sought, in other words the freedom of pure play, rather than the rational limits of Kantian freedom, which is the freedom of man as a social being, freedom consequent on plurality in being rather than singularity.

Another important aspect of the development of the play element was in the use he began to make of the accidental. The various 'rendezvous' that brought the readymades into being seemed on the one hand to result from whim (if we accept Duchamp's 'specification for the readymade') although the impossibility of destroying the link between the eye that sees (and selects) and one's memory of likes and dislikes seems obvious, and so somewhat mitigates any rigorous claim that there was something random about his choice of objects. It is rather that the chance element was contained in the fact that Duchamp was effectively gambling on the reception of the readymades by posterity (on the moment of *rendezvous*), and one reason he gave up on painting was that he perceived the resolution of this wager to be unforeseeable in all forms of artistic activity anyway:

The danger is in pleasing an immediate public, the immediate public that comes around you and takes you in and accepts you and gives you success and everything. Instead of that, you should wait fifty or a hundred years for your true public (Sanouillet and Peterson, 1973: 133).

To paint for a living, it seemed, was to compromise the purity of the artistic impulse; although, attempting to unearth Duchamp's intentions by taking a closer look at the evidence left behind in interviews and notes is a precarious exercise, always likely to founder on the possibility that he was being far from candid, and

this is especially the case with his interviews. Having said that, the existence of the notes collected as the *Green Box* indicated a sustained level of creative activity and suggest that many of the readymades appear to have been 'created' far from accidentally (Sanouillet and Peterson, 1973: 26-71).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the importance of the second, delayed, rendezvous marks these items out as no ordinary artworks; they realized no real craft, no expression of self, and in lacking this creative identity they are then seen to be meaningful only in the act of observation.

For his part of this wager, as Duchamp reveals in his recollection of the choice of the earliest readymades, the most important element in the act of differentiation was realized by the slightest personal touch – by making the merest alteration to the item, yet one that produced the displaced object as artwork:

In 1913 I had the happy idea to fasten a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool and watch it turn. A few months later I bought a cheap reproduction of a winter evening landscape, which I called 'Pharmacy' after adding two small dots, a red one and a yellow one, in the horizon. In New York in 1915 I bought at a hardware store a snow shovel on which I wrote 'In Advance of the Broken Arm' (Sanouillet and Peterson, 1973: 141-42).

And as Thierry De Duve argues thus was born an idea that would revolutionize art in the twentieth century: the idea that the artist would respect no limitations of form, matter, or mediation (De Duve, 1998). These early 'prototypes' for the readymade also went beyond contemporaneous attempts, by Duchamp and others, to break formal representational limitations (De Duve, 1991a). For example, the attempt in futurist painting to incorporate motion into a work of art was eclipsed by the fact that *Bicycle Wheel* was a 'moving sculpture' – although it conveyed a motion which had no point, no goal, as the circular motion of the upturned wheel prevented the possibility of the linear progression of rational movement (Seigel,

1995: 122; Ades, et al, 1999: 47). Here, too, the circular movement is analogous to the play motion: directionless, and non-teleological.

A key aspect of the development of his notion of the readymade is that it reveals Duchamp at beginning a long history of fascination with disguise. These games of hide and seek would continue throughout his life culminating in *Etant donnés (Given)*, a work which takes the play of ambiguity to the limit by the very condition that the viewer was required to give legitimacy to the notion that the surface conceals some unknown depths by the necessity of voyeuristically placing oneself in front of the peephole on the exterior of the work (a large, roughly constructed, wooden door), in order to try and figure out what is going on behind.<sup>7</sup>

Taken as a whole Duchamp's work represents a journey that was not possible to the same extent within the tradition of painting. For Duchamp, the problem with painting was partially that the necessity of working with certain accepted materials itself imposed a limitation, in that the artist standing with brush in hand would find it difficult to avoid self-expression and so it was the medium of expression itself that was blocking the realization of *ideas*. He considered painting as one means of expression 'among others':

and not a complete end for life at all; in the same way I consider that color is only a means of expression in painting and not an end. In other words, painting should not be exclusively retinal or visual; it should have to do with the gray matter (Sanouillet and Peterson, 1973: 135-36).

The connection between the acceptability of means of expression, the use of a particular medium, and artistic autonomy, was at the root of the problem for Duchamp. The autonomous artist, like the autonomous subject in the history of Western philosophy, was thought to be 'transparent,' and this was reflected in the assumption that art, particularly 'realist' art, was comprehensible – that is to say susceptible to understanding on the basis of what can be visualized, and assimilat-



ed to some previously established categorical knowledge; the rational mind assumes that what is on the surface is representative of something coherent, something genuine and fixed, rather than something fleeting or elusive (Pippin, 1991: 12-13; 34-38).

We might suggest that Duchamp's problem with painting could be stated thus: the painting, relying on its bounded, finite form, as the *prima facie* evidence of plastic activity (and its full stop), presents the artist as someone who attempts to connect with some truth, but instead of accepting the empirical evidence of surfaces, or indeed that the flat plane of the canvas could present anything more than an opinion in a diverting form, Duchamp preferred to say (so it seems) that the surface presentation of the world when aligned to the artist's view of 'reality', was wholly contingent. It was really no more than an a mask of appearance (but this fact was concealed by the necessity of adhering to a particular form and medium), and that therefore this surface could be pulled off to reveal that all such presentations were really no more than a series of 'just suppose' statements. Duchamp's *delays* were also, therefore, a *perhaps*, but unlike art that assumed representational veracity they did not pretend to be otherwise; on the contrary, they gloried in their ambiguity. Where painting had become a safe bet, Duchamp now proposed to wager with abandon.

The readymades as ambiguous 'objects' derive their force from the separation of object and functional domain. They are unlike any other objects of art, in so far as they turn the space of art into a playground, although this not in virtue of the objects taking on the appearance of toys; the readymades are disruptive because they stand in denial of the possibility of a contextual understanding – as transformed utilitarian objects they are simply 'in the wrong place' (Basalla, 1982). And as playful bequests that are only fully realized by the observer engaging in the play they remain forever suspended, existing only as a 'perhaps,' or as a Duchampian 'delay.' The implication of the *delay* then consists in the fact that it opens up a gap



in understanding and brings us face to face with the ambiguity of appearances. Perhaps it is only through an act of cunning, of devilish intent, that things are generally what we believe them to be (or perhaps we should say *what one calls them*), and that epistemic certainty consists in the *charming* of disorder; which is to say that sense, reason, and language transform this disorder to make a fetish of appearances.

The readymade introduced the uneasy suggestion that it is we who *objectify* the world – nothing is given in the sense that everything requires the mediation of interpretation; everything is conveyed via language and categories, and so on. By de-contextualizing the object (i.e., by removing the identity of the object) and adding some dissociative title Duchamp had:

Carried to its highest point pictorial nominalism, that is, the substitution of the linguistic for the plastic in art, or of the discourse on art for the art object, ever silent in its revolt and therefore subject to appropriation (Compagnon, 1994: 101).

The art object established by naming (i.e., not in terms of properties or obvious features, was only contingently *given*) could take on an infinite number of meanings – it was the wager as a bequest. Not only did 'the object' not exist within a frame; in its boundlessness it could not at the time be contained by the logic of an ordering mind, nor slotted into a neat definitional 'box,' as perhaps the product of yet another of modernism's countless 'isms.'

#### INSCRIPTION AND DECEPTION

Duchamp's first proper readymade (i.e., the first wholly *abducted* object) was a bottle dryer that he purchased in 1914. It remained a bottle dryer until 1915 when

he wrote to his sister in Paris, who had possession of the item, explaining the significance of the object, and asked her then to paint an inscription on the bottom, and then sign it with the words '[after] Marcel Duchamp.' By this exercise of an authorial power – delivered by proxy, no less – the bottle rack was removed from context, differentiated by choice, and given a unique status (by contrast with which the prior functional purpose of the object seemed merely to consign it to a lowly, banal and utilitarian place in the world). This was the magical power of the authorial inscription to disorder categorical placement.

The mass produced urinal that became *Fountain* (after being turned upside down and finished off, again, with the signature of the 'artist') was the first ready-made to be brought to public attention, and is arguably the item which more than any other produced by Duchamp, changed the artistic landscape of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the apparent random gesture of taking a familiar and widely available object and using it in this way, there was a high level of planning involved in the public unveiling, and eventual reception of this object. And it is the play of the public appearance/non-appearance of the readymade that eventually unveils its shattering proclamation that one need not paint to be an artist, nor exercise the skill of hand in the formation of some object – that anything goes. In order to achieve this effect Duchamp not only presented a certain object under disguise, as it were (thus its status as an 'object' and the language of objectivity becomes questionable), but he had to go to elaborate lengths to disguise his own identity as the person behind *Fountain* – and so it bore the signature of a mysterious 'R. Mutt' (later 'identified' as Richard Mutt).

The first public display of *Fountain* was intended to be the exhibition of the American Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917, and although Duchamp was actually chairman of the hanging committee for this particular show, in



2. Marcel Duchamp, in another of his disguises, as *Rose Sélavy*. Photograph by Man Ray, 1921.

the end *Fountain* remained hidden – like Duchamp’s identity as the actual person behind its submission – it was veiled by a curtain and set apart from the rest of the show, secluded, for the time being, from public view because the Society did not know what to make of it (De Duve, 1991b; Camfield, 1991). The duplicity of Duchamp’s role in the whole affair is reinforced by the decisions he took as leader of the hanging committee for the exhibition.

Firstly, he decided that the works – and these numbered thousands – should be displayed in alphabetical order, thus eschewing conventional hanging practices, which relied on establishing some context for the apprehension of the work (normally ordering by chronology or by artistic school). The second important decision that Duchamp was also behind was that for this show there would be ‘no jury, no prizes,’ and thus no official declaration of relative merit or worth – no ordering of

value. In the end, however, as *Fountain* was denied a place in the exhibition by the decision of what can only be described as a *jury* (Duchamp's own colleagues), we are led to conclude that this exclusion may have been just what Duchamp had hoped for (De Duve, 1996).

By presenting an object that was unidentifiable within the context of this exhibition, Duchamp revealed that role of the jury (a body established to adjudicate on matters of value) was to employ social means to overcome a universal and subjective inability to remain an indifferent observer: it revealed also a tendency to stick with what we know, which is to say with that which can be assigned a place in some order. The ambiguity of *Fountain* could not be allowed to dwell over the exhibition, to scandalize the whole affair, the jury decided, and thus it was excluded; along with difficult questions over the Society's apparent openness to new art. Nevertheless, the excluded object did overtake events as Duchamp, once again anonymously (i.e., in disguise), published a defence of the readymade in an issue of a magazine called *The Blind Man*.<sup>9</sup>

As well as submitting the object under the name of Richard Mutt, Duchamp took the ruse to extreme lengths by fooling friends who were fellow members of the Society of Independents, as well as others such as the influential gallery owner and dealer Alfred Stieglitz, who afterwards famously photographed *Fountain* (thus contributing to its iconic status), believing it to be the work of R. Mutt, an unfortunate artist slighted by the narrow minded attitude of the Society. Thus Duchamp's deception was total – he even withheld his true role in the affair from his own sister Suzanne, to whom he wrote, “One of my female friends under a masculine pseudonym, Richard Mutt, sent in a porcelain urinal as a sculpture” (De Duve, 1998: 104). The entire scandal of the American Independents show, and the case of Richard Mutt, was an elaborate set-up by Duchamp, a test to see how accurate was the claim of the Independents that any artist who paid the fee of six dollars could display their work. Ostensibly, this democratic condition was a demonstra-

tion of openness, a gesture that removed aesthetic hierarchies, although as Duchamp was to discover, this attitude was simply a front, and in effect, the American Society of Independents had a well-formed idea of what could be shown within an art context, and this did not include the profane *Fountain* (Camfield, 1991: 133-84).

What, then, may we draw from Duchamp's actions here? What was the real import of this gesture – the readymade, this strange bequest?

The notion of readymade, and the ambiguity over its role and meaning, effectively throws our attention onto something else in order to try and resolve the unavoidable 'what is it' question that such uncertain phenomena seem to provoke, and it is impossible to explore this without confronting the question of identity. The ontological status of identity – as both a principle of correspondence and individuation – presents an apparent duality that actually disguises the knowledge that identification by one means is at the same time the negative performance of the other (or, as Hegel would have said, *every determination is a negation*). In other words an identity established through similarity (correspondence) or individuation (difference) is an act of *disconnection* that seeks – however consciously or otherwise this is pursued – to give it some order to experience (and thus to the world). The readymade object itself, therefore, still raises important questions about the objective identity that art is presumed to establish between the artist and the work on the one hand, and the *something* that produces the creative impulse on the other (presumably for the artist this would be the identity that brings together or unifies discrete ideas/phenomena, resulting in the inspired idea). Duchamp's elevation of the conceptual in art may be understood as more than simply a decision to give up painting; it may be viewed as an opportunity to explore identity itself through the strategic adoption of disguise.

## PLAY AS DISORDER

Part of the revolutionary impact of the readymades can be glimpsed in the way that Duchamp, like no one else before, situates disguise within the most elementary constructive practices of everyday life. We should recall that modern painters before Duchamp operated from an aesthetic of *authenticity* (and the idea still persists that it is the physical contact of the artist with the materials of painting that identifies the authentic artist). Even after many decades of conceptual shocks the influx of 'gray matter' into the work of art still causes controversy. Duchamp sought to undermine the authenticity of the artist with play and irony, but equally introduced a radically disordering element in the suggestion that the artistic rearrangement of the object world (in painting) was the establishment of order. The readymade, then, initiated a radical *missorting* of this art world. As Octavio Paz wrote:

If the centre is in a state of permanent schism, if the ancient notions of solid matter and clear and distinct reason disappear, the result is general disorientation [...] Duchamp's intention is to get rid forever of 'the possibility of recognizing any two things as being like each other' (Paz, 1970: 10).

The play of disorder makes for unstable identities, this is certain. But it is of crucial importance that the destructive intention of Duchamp's 'statements' was equalled by a subjective indifference to the world. Duchamp's work says that we should just forget about meaning in art having anything to do with the artist – like the weather it rather has something more to do with chance. And chance is in the role of creativity passed to the beholder of the readymade, and so the 'creative acts' became as myriad, as unpredictable, and as indivisible as the quanta of the physical world (Compagnon, 1994: 102). Certainly by redefining and legitimising a new kind of artistic 'creativity' the readymades uncovered a world of seemingly discrete objects that could be pulled together – or framed – by ambiguous and contingent

identifications. It is by unveiling the object in the *wrong place* that a move away from plasticity (in Huizinga's terms) and towards the accidental occurs. Thus, the object is only truly created by overcoming the delay that separates the two poles that resolve its objective ambiguity (as an out of place object), and thus chance is in the meeting of the readymade with the eye and mind of the observer. It is this that is the crucial demonstration of the fragility of identity in modern society.

But this was only revealed by another play of identity, one that took ambiguity and playfulness with the idea of the artist as bearer of an authentic identity and transferred it into the social realm as the immanent disorder of all identity relations. Thus, whilst we know of Duchamp's adoption of disguise mostly with regard to the R. Mutt and Rose Sélavy personae he was also:

*Marcel Douxami, Marsélavy, and Sélatz*, not to mention the ersatz names he was given by others: *Victor* and *Totor* by Henri-Pierre Roché, *Marchand du sel* by Robert Desnos, *Pierre Delaire* by Henri Waste (De Duve, 1998: 399-400).

A final act in this unstable existence is found in the *Wanted* poster of 1923, an imitation of a police circular featuring Duchamp posing as a criminal, 'George W. Welch' alias 'Bull' alias 'Pickens' *etcetry etcetry* (it goes on). The police mug-shot, with its depiction of the full face and side profile was supposed to supply the final means of identification, but as Victor Stoichita has pointed out, Duchamp – whilst presenting his own face – still manages to mask the conventional *dialogue* of the mug-shot, which is given by having the side view look towards the frontal view as if:

The person's identity were thought to be engaged in the stimulating conversation of a schize [...] Duchamp unveils the illusion: what we see is a disrupted representation, a representation where the mould of the double





3. *Wanted/\$2000 Reward, Marcel Duchamp, 1923.*

mug-shot introduces a concealed but significant breach, a representation that does not promote an affirmation of identity but of false identity (Stoichita, 1997: 226-27).

Thus, the one remaining means of confirming identity – whilst appearing to be utterly genuine in its presentation – is subverted by the simplest alteration (the reconfiguration of the mugshot).

It may be presumptuous given all that has been said up to this point to even utter the word truth...but perhaps the truth is that once Duchamp gave up painting, and thus the kind of self-expression that could be recognized and understood, he no longer knew, or cared who he was – he had tried to paint in the style of the



Fauves, of Cubism, but realized that these periods were just like costumes he was able to adorn himself with, to suit the fashion of the day. This, he believed, was how it all worked: it was all a game. When asked once to find a way of conveying what his work meant, Duchamp said that the only word he could find to describe his work was 'metaphysical.' It was:

pushing the idea of doubt [found] in Descartes...to a much further point than they ever did in the school of Cartesianism: doubt in myself, doubt in everything...in the end it comes to doubt the verb 'to be' (Ades, *et al*, 1999: 61).

In the play of ambiguity, a doubt was thus introduced, and it is this that becomes the most potent symbol of the relation between plasticity, play and disorder. 'To be' is the verb that identifies through equivalence, that yet designates also exclusion, the 'what is not' of belonging, the '=' of contraction, the 'is' that declares the contingent relation of its own identity, because 'to be' is also ... *to be in doubt*.

#### ENDNOTES

1. See Schiller (1994), letters 11 to 15. Others, such as Victor Cousin (1792-1867) in *Lectures on the True, the Beautiful and the Good* (1836) claimed that the essence of aesthetic creation was not to be found in form or material; that 'what expression tries to make felt, is not what the eye can see and the hand touch, evidently it is something invisible.' (in Harrison, Wood, and Gaiger 1998: 194)
2. Johan Huizinga was a Dutch historian (1872-1945). His other major works include *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1919), and *Erasmus* (1924).
3. Huizinga (1955: 168), in discussing Schiller's notion of the 'play instinct', dismisses such a 'psychic function [...] as somewhat inadequate.' To derive art

- wholly from 'some hypothetical "play-instinct" obliges us to do the same for architecture and painting,' something he regarded as 'preposterous'.
4. Duchamp (1887-1968) began his artistic career as a conventional painter, for the most part following the latest artistic trends. He first attained fame, if not notoriety, for a 'Cubo-Futurist' painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1911-12), which caused a scandal at the 'Armory Show' in New York City, 1913 (otherwise known as The International Exhibition of Modern Art, held at New York's 69<sup>th</sup> Regiment Armory). See Tomkins (1998) for full historical background.
  5. 'Readymades' were everyday items (objects *already made*), the first being a bottle-dryer, which Duchamp signed (as an artist would sign a painting) and thus declared to be art. The signature therefore confirmed their 'creation,' which was given legitimacy by a subsequent elevation from the practical functionality that determined the everyday use of these objects to the aesthetic context of the art world, where they would now be displayed as art. See Ades, et al (1999) De Duve (1996) and Paz (1970).
  6. *The Green Box* consists of notes originally published in 1934, detailing the development of Duchamp's ideas for a number of specific works, as well as giving written form to some of his concepts, including the 'readymade'. *The Green Box* is published in Sanouillet and Peterson (eds.) (1973) *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*.
  7. The full title of this work, which was completed over a 20-year period, is *Etant donnés: 1 La Chute d'eau 2. Le gaz d'éclairage* (*Given: 1. The Waterfall 2. The Illuminating Gas*). For more detail on the genesis and context of this work, see Ades, et al (1999: 190-205), who describe the work thus: 'Etant donnés is three-dimensional but can never be seen (or photographed) as a whole. In a bare room [...] is a large wooden door set in a brick arch. There is no visible means of opening the door, but two small holes at eye level invite closer inspection. What is seen through the holes is startling and unexpected. Beyond a dark space and a jagged hole in a brick wall is a brilliantly lit landscape with, in the foreground, the 'real' figure of a woman, prone, naked, legs splayed to the spectator. In her raised left arm she holds a small gas lamp, faintly glowing.' (193)
  8. Duchamp, in his working notes published as *The Green Box*, spoke of his creations as 'delays': 'Use *delay* instead of picture or painting,' a description he said was 'a way of succeeding in no longer thinking that the thing in question is a picture – to make a delay of it [i.e., the work of art] in the most general way possible, not so much in the different meanings in which delay can be taken, but rather *in their indecisive reunion* [my emphasis].' (quoted in Sanouillet and Peterson,

- 1973: 26). That is to say, the notion of *delay* describes the indeterminate reception of the art object by the audience; an audience that – as I have said – have a significant, if not equal part in the 'creation' of the object in bringing to it their own interpretations (which may subjectively resolve the delay, but do not guarantee that the 'delay' can ever be overcome in the objective sense of rendering the art work meaningful).
9. The defence was actually anonymously authored (although it is thought to have been written by Duchamp himself) and published as an editorial in *The Blind Man*, a magazine that had been published by Duchamp and a few friends to coincide with the exhibition. The defence of *Fountain* and its 'creator' R. Mutt took the form of an open letter to the Society of Independent Artists, declaring that an aesthetic contribution had been made as Mr. Mutt 'took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view,' meaning that he had 'created a new thought for that object' (in Tomkins, 1998: 185). Near the end of his life Duchamp told Pierre Cabanne that he had written the name 'R. Mutt' on the urinal to 'avoid connection with the personal' and that the scandal was intensified because the organisers, through gossip, suspected he had sent the object, although circumstances decreed that this was something he could not confirm. See Pierre Cabanne (1971: 55).

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