

**Thierry de Duve on the Avant Garde and the Invention of Art**  
**Part 6 from 6 essays** in successive issues of ArtForum, beginning in Oct., 2013

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# “This Is Art”: Anatomy of a Sentence

THIERRY DE DUVE ON AESTHETIC JUDGMENT

**IT IS THE SENTENCE** that changed everything: the very definition of an artwork by pure designation, sheer declaration. In this final installment of his series of new essays for *Artforum*, [Thierry de Duve](#) argues that to understand the ways in which we define and view art today, we must analyze the most basic statement one can make about a work of art—the phrase that forms the bedrock of all aesthetic judgment. If, in his previous texts for these pages, the historian and philosopher has moved from the hallowed halls of the nineteenth-century Beaux-Arts Salon to the scandal over Marcel Duchamp’s notorious 1917 readymade, *Fountain*, to that work’s thundering repercussions throughout the twentieth century, de Duve now parses how a single sentence can mean a world of difference for art.



**Bernar Venet, *Tas de charbon* (Pile of Coal), 1963**, coal, dimensions variable.

*Sometimes an expression has to be withdrawn from language and sent for cleaning, then it can be put*

*back into circulation.*

—Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>1</sup>

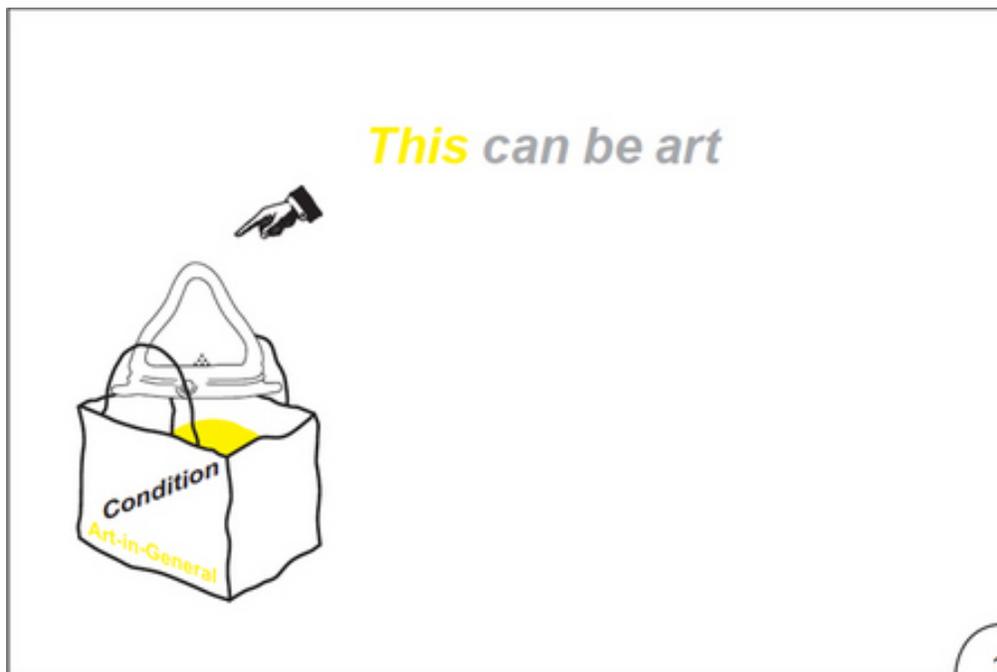
**AN ONION** has been peeled down to its elusive, theoretical core. Each of my five preceding essays in these pages has stripped away one layer and looked underneath at the next, reading the onion as a message because the message had the structure of an onion. The messenger was Marcel Duchamp: First, he revealed himself as the champion—or the Cassandra?—of the “anything goes” and the “everyone is an artist” dogmas, then as the innocent bystander (or the well-informed insider?) who brought us the news that the French Beaux-Arts system had collapsed. Further, he appeared as the spokesman for the invention of non-art, and, finally, as the harbinger of the Art-in-General system under which we now live. His message was put in the mail in 1917, reached its audience sometime in the mid-1960s, and is still provoking all sorts of responses today. It took the guise of a urinal titled *Fountain*.

If I were to reduce Duchamp’s multilayered message to the one layer that synthesizes the others, I’d say that *Fountain*, 1917, heralds the passage from the Beaux-Arts system—where, in order to be a plausible work of art, something had to be a poem, or a statue, or a symphony, or a painting, and so on—to the Art-in-General system, where works of art can literally be made from anything whatsoever. One suspects that this passage has immensely complex historical causes, which I have only touched upon, and equally complex sociological determinants, which I have left alone. I’m interested in reflecting on it not sociologically but aesthetically.

To reflect aesthetically on that passage is, first of all, to consider both the Beaux-Arts and the Art-in-General systems less as social institutions than as *aesthetic regimes* (to reclaim Jacques Rancière’s words),<sup>2</sup> and then to wonder about the substitution of the naked phrase “This is art” for sentences such as “This poem is wonderfully lyrical,” “This statue is monumental but ugly,” “This symphony is divinely sublime,” “This painting is so clumsy it hardly qualifies as a painting,” and the like. Note that I mix examples of negative as well as positive judgments, and that the last one poses its object on a threshold. We should address these judgments’ contrast to the naked “This is art” at some point; for now I want to underline that, in the beaux-arts regime, the referent of “this” must belong to an identifiable art form, even if it is not named. In the art-in-general regime, on the other hand, “this” may refer to anything, nameable or unnameable, whether or not it belongs to an identifiable art form or medium. (Here, “Beaux-Arts” and “Art-in-General” are capitalized when these expressions refer to systems, i.e., institutions, and lowercased when they refer to aesthetic regimes, i.e., modes of aesthetic apprehension.)

But I’m getting ahead of myself. My title promises the “anatomy” of a sentence. So I should start the dissection with “this,” the first word of the sentence, without presuming anything that the term doesn’t analytically contain. Pronouns, adverbs of time and space, and demonstratives such as “this” and “that” are what linguists call deictics. These are words that are tied to the circumstances of their uttering and graft language onto reality. They are, so to speak, pointed index fingers. By saying “this,” I can show something without having to name it. I also *must* show something: If I say “this” while keeping my arms crossed, you won’t know what I’m talking about. Two pointing fingers are thus required to fix the referent: a linguistic deictic, such as “this” or “that,” and a physically embodied sign, such as the pointing hand in figure 1. However, the word “this” and the pointing hand taken together are still incapable of letting us

know what is being talked about. I must place something in front of the index finger: something, anything, as long as it is a *thing*, an entity endowed with physical existence and perceptible via our sensory organs. (An idea is not a thing; you cannot point a finger at an idea.) So let's place any old thing, chosen at random, in front of the finger: a urinal, for example. I beg you to play the game. The drawing in figure 1 represents the urinal Duchamp bought from the J. L. Mott Iron Works company, a fraction of a second *before* it was presented to the hanging committee (not a jury) of the first show of the Society of Independent Artists in April 1917. (The photograph in figure 6, by contrast, represents *Fountain*, the same urinal *after* Duchamp entered it into the record for future art history.) The urinal in figure 1 is not yet art. For the time being, let us postpone "This *is* art" and consider "This *can be* art."



Under what conditions can any given thing be art? Now is the time to remind the reader of the caveat I insisted upon in the first of my essays in this series: When I claimed that it was "nowadays *technically feasible* and *institutionally legitimate* to make art from anything whatsoever," I added that I was not able to prove what I asserted. What I then called the "anything goes condition," later baptized the Art-in-General system, and now consider as the art-in-general *regime*—rested, and still rests, on the postulate that anything can be art, indeed.<sup>3</sup> Once that postulate is made, then a urinal is an example of a candidate for the status of art as adequate as anything else in the universe, and to ask under what conditions it can be art is useless, because the answer is given by the postulate itself: There are no empirically demonstrable conditions for plausible art-status candidacy.

Of course, I wouldn't have chosen a urinal if it were not for the precedent of Duchamp's *Fountain*. The theory I'm sketching out wouldn't be necessary if *Fountain* were not on the record as a work of art; traditional theories of taste would go unchallenged. I'm not denying the recursive structure of my reasoning; quite the contrary: This is my way of acknowledging receipt

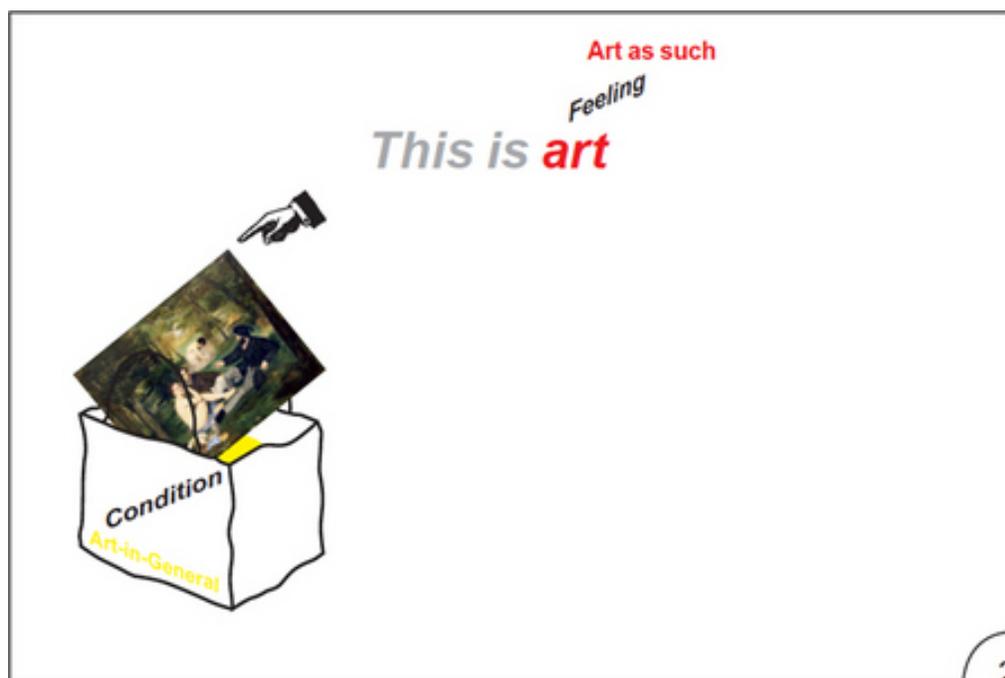
of the message Duchamp put in the mail with *Fountain*, my way of recognizing that we no longer live in the Beaux-Arts system, my way of admitting that once a urinal is art, anything and everything can be art, *including a urinal*. There is recursivity but no circularity in this admission. Once *Fountain* is art, all other urinals *can be* art. The sentence I'm dissecting has a special status, though, because its enunciation articulates the moment when *Fountain becomes* art. In the second of my essays, I pointed out the intuitive truth hiding in Okwui Enwezor's claim that "it is the artist who decides what an object of art *is or what it can be*" (emphasis mine).<sup>4</sup> This may not apply to anything else, but it applies to *Fountain*. Duchamp simultaneously decided that an object of art *was* and *could be* a urinal. For a urinal is a work of art only if it can be one, but it can be one only in the Art-in-General system, whose acknowledgment requires that this particular urinal, *Fountain*, be deemed a work of art.

But I'm getting ahead of myself again. Figure 1 shows a bag labeled "condition," which is a representation of the condition in which we find ourselves since Duchamp. It contains all plausible candidates for the name of art, which is to say the entire universe, represented here by the yellow stuff in the bag. Everything that has a physical existence can now be art. Again, *Art-in-General* is the name I gave to this no-conditions condition, to this particular art world that has replaced the Beaux-Arts system. No longer in the bag, not yet out of the bag, our urinal has just been singled out by the deictic "this" and has thus moved from potential to actual candidate for the name of art.

**LET'S NOW IMAGINE** figure 1 with "This is art" replacing "This can be art"; and let's turn our attention from the word "this" to the word "art." But we won't understand how "art" is employed in "This (urinal) is art" unless we first understand how it is used in less controversial cases. Let's forget our urinal for a while and replace it with something we can all agree, today, is art: Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Luncheon on the Grass), 1863. It is being pulled out of the bag of the Art-in-General system because art-in-general is the aesthetic regime under which we live and appreciate *all* art, including art that was made under the Beaux-Arts system and the beaux-arts regime. The focus is now on the word "art" as it is pronounced by someone—a flesh-and-blood subject of enunciation, thus capable of subjective responses.<sup>5</sup> Let's imagine hearing that person exclaim, "This is art!" in a certain tone: of enthusiasm, for example, or relief. It would sound like "Wow, this is art!" in the first case, or "Now this is art, at last!" in the latter. In both cases, it would mean "This deserves to be called art; this has crossed the threshold of art worthy of the name." The word "art" would thus convey an aesthetic judgment. Since the eighteenth century, when a number of British philosophers began to theorize aesthetic judgment, or judgment of taste, it has been commonly recognized that such judgments express a feeling. Pleasure is the feeling of beauty; the mixture of terror and delight is, according to Edmund Burke, the feeling of the sublime. In my example, the word "art" expresses enthusiasm or relief.

Can other feelings be expressed by the word "art"? Definitely. All feelings can. It's a corollary of the art-in-general regime. There is no more limit to the range of human feelings that art can express and elicit (except those inherent in our human finitude) than there is to the number of things that can become works of art. Now, it seems strange to choose to express one's feeling with a word such as "art," which is clearly not fit for the task. Formulas such as "This is entralling" or "This is frightening" convey the feeling they express. "This is art" does no such thing. It says nothing about the nature, the quality, the intensity, or the color of the feeling it

expresses—which is why I had to imagine it pronounced in a certain tone. The bare exclamation “Wow!” succeeds in communicating the speaker’s enthusiasm much better than the word “art,” which in turn seems much better tailored to convey the idea of a substance or an essence—loaded words—than to express a feeling. There is a simple way to eschew these loaded words for the time being. Hearing someone exclaim, “Ah! That’s coffee!” in front of a good espresso, we immediately understand that if this person deals with the substance or essence of coffee, it is in the chemical, not the philosophical, sense. Above all, we understand that she has expressed a judgment of taste. (Actually, the espresso need not be good and its appreciation need not be laudatory. Let’s say someone pours me a cup of coffee and asks me, “How’s the coffee?” And I reply, jadedly, “Well, it’s coffee.” I would have expressed the sensation that this coffee barely passed the test.)



The word “art” in “This is art” defines the feeling of addressing a work of art no more than the word “coffee” in “This is coffee” defines the sensation of a good or not so good espresso. So the only way to define the feeling expressed by the sentence “This is art” is to say that it is the feeling *that* this is art. There is nothing tautological in this definition. We are dealing here with the reflexivity inherent in aesthetic judgments. Immanuel Kant had already noticed that aesthetic judgments are not determining but rather reflective. This means that they neither obey rules and criteria nor suppose the mastery of them; rather, they draw their rules and criteria from themselves, in action, through a feedback loop of the mind. “I know a good espresso when I taste one.” Similarly: “I know a work of art when I feel one.”

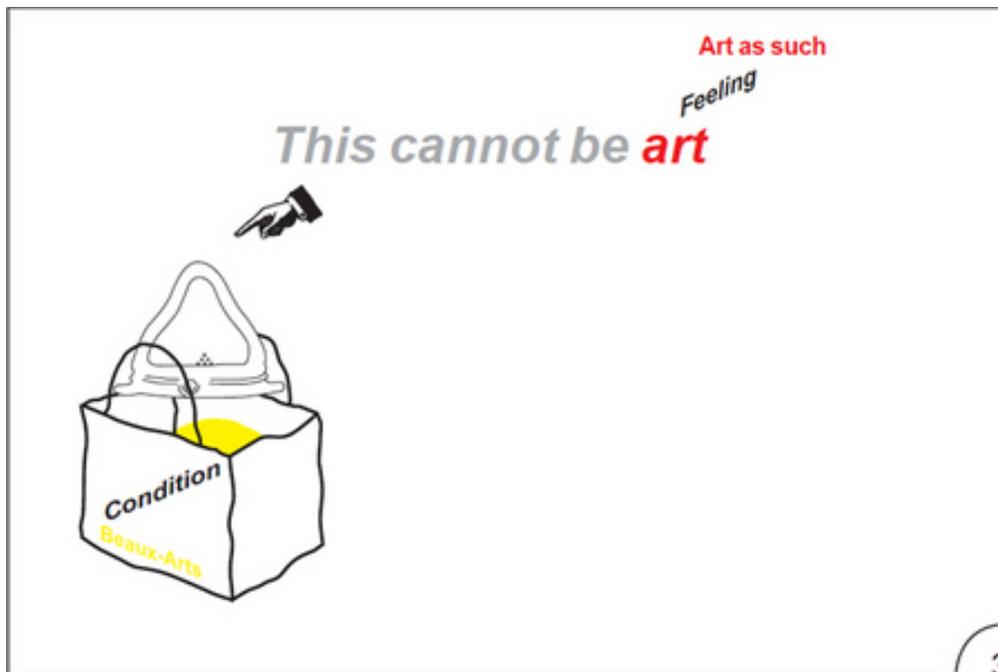
The name I give to the feeling of dealing with art is “art as such”: art as art. Nothing else is explained or defined by the sentence “This is art” when it is used to express an aesthetic judgment. “This is art, period.” Neither “Art-in-General” (in yellow) nor “art as such” (in red) in figure 2 are definitions of art. They specify different usages of the word “art.” When we use the word in formulas such as “art galleries” or “art magazines,” we are referring to elements of the

Art-in-General system; we make no value judgment. But we certainly utter an aesthetic judgment when we use “art” to mean “Wow!” So far, the anatomy of the sentence “This is art” yields what could be called an expanded theory of taste, a theory of taste generalized to include all possible feelings.

Let’s now reinstate our urinal as the referent to “this,” and consider that it is the urinal Richard Mutt sent in, “frozen” at the very moment when it was received by the board members of the Society of Independent Artists for inclusion in their no-jury exhibition in 1917 (figure 3). Beatrice Wood wrote two versions of the story, in which either Rockwell Kent or George Bellows was engaged in a heated discussion over *Fountain* with collector Walter Arensberg, who had been Duchamp’s accomplice in the R. Mutt affair from the outset. In the first version, Kent explodes: “Do you mean that if a man chose to exhibit horse manure we would have to accept it!”<sup>6</sup> Kent’s angry tone and his choice of a basis for comparison betray that he was absolutely not ready to look at a urinal as an object of aesthetic contemplation. One glance had been enough: Such an indecent thing as a urinal *was not art and could not be art*, period! But in Wood’s second version of the story, Arensberg suavely defends Mutt with these words: “A lovely form has been revealed, freed from its functional purpose, therefore a man clearly has made an aesthetic contribution.”<sup>7</sup>

Arensberg was in the know. We might say that he had received Duchamp’s message from the horse’s mouth; he had some awareness that, with the Independents, the world had switched from the Beaux-Arts to the Art-in-General system, whereas Kent and Bellows were in the dark, stranded in the Beaux-Arts system, unaware of the consequences of their own no-jury rule. But there is more: Ironically or not, Arensberg intimated that you could look at a urinal aesthetically, and even have a pleasant experience, if you accepted first, or simultaneously, that a urinal was a plausible candidate for the name “art.” (You could also appreciate it aesthetically for its design, but by mentioning that the object had been “freed from its functional purpose,” Arensberg ruled out that possibility.) This means that, provided you acknowledge the Art-in-General system, you can reinstate the beaux-arts regime as a way of appraising a urinal aesthetically. More simply put: You can look at a urinal as a sculpture, but only if you call it art first. (This reveals an interesting reversal of what happens in the Beaux-Arts system, where a three-dimensional object *can be* art if it *is* a sculpture; here a urinal *can be* a sculpture if it *is* art.)

It doesn’t really matter whether Kent or Bellows censured *Fountain* because it could not be art in their eyes, or whether *Fountain* could not be art because, in censuring it, Kent and Bellows made an exception to their no-jury rule. Their intensely negative feelings are on the record, and I think we can safely generalize: There was no way an unsuspecting person presented with a urinal in 1917 could have had the feeling that *this was art*. Anyone with a serious concern for art in that situation would have had a violent, painful, repulsive feeling that *this was not art and could not be art*. To this day, *Fountain* remains an extraordinary test case for the theory according to which the word “art” expresses a judgment of taste based on feeling: It validates the theory only for the negative judgment “This cannot be art.”<sup>8</sup> To seriously regard *Fountain* as art requires another theory, for which feelings are not enough. Theories of taste falter.



**TO UNDERSTAND** why feelings are not enough, let's bring back Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, which a theory of taste still accommodates. The word "art," I noted, is not fit for expressing feelings. It is a noun; it is meant to designate things. (Compare figure 4 with figure 2: In red, "art" expresses a *feeling*; in green, "art" designates things; of course, "art" does both at once.) As designators, nouns are analogous to the deictics "this" or "that": They behave like pointing fingers. But in truth, they do the reverse of what deictics do. Deictics allow us to show without naming; nouns allow us to name without showing. Nouns dispense with the real, embodied index finger that deictics need in order to fix the referent (hence the parentheses around the pointing hand on the right in figure 4).

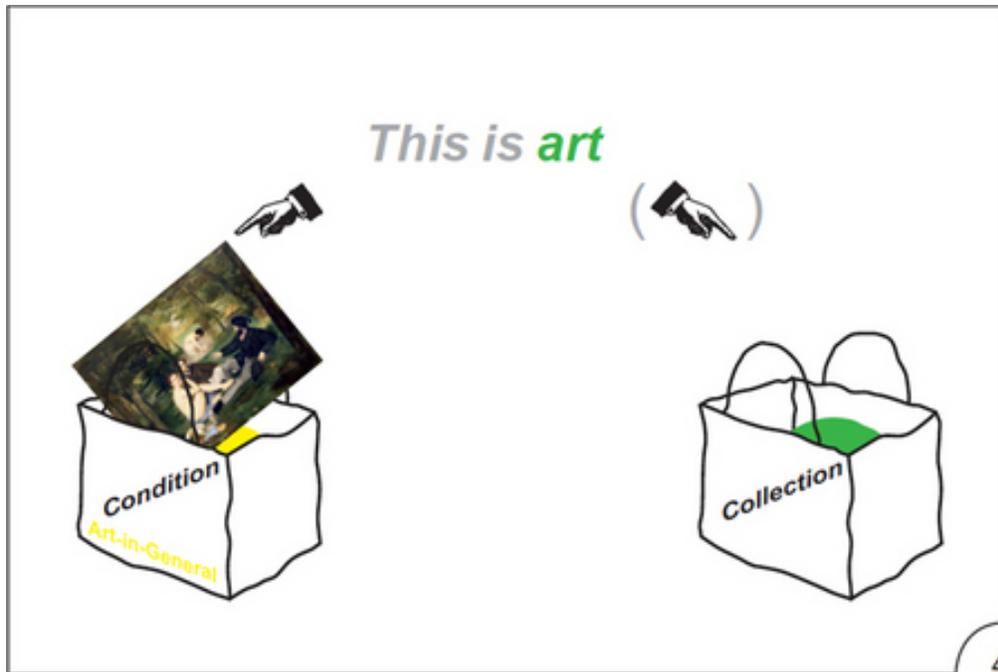
To materialize what the word "art" designates, let's place a bag in front of the right hand's index finger, and in that bag, some green stuff. Just as the yellow stuff in the bag on the left stands for a myriad of objects—things with a phenomenal existence, perceptible physical entities—so the green stuff in the bag on the right stands for objects, too: in this case, works of art. You can put works of art in a bag; you cannot put the essence of art in a bag. What the bag actually contains is a number of *exemplary examples* of a purported substance or essence called art, serving as a basis for comparison. I maintain that aesthetic judgment is comparative, and I keep open the question of whether there are absolute aesthetic judgments (other than negative ones—more about that soon). If aesthetic judgments are comparative, what do they compare? Figure 4 answers: They compare the object on the left, designated by "this"—in our example, Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*—with those objects amid all the ones contained in the bag on the right that form the relevant basis for comparison. The most likely objects to be summoned for comparison are: other Manet paintings; paintings from Manet's time; paintings *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* seems to quote and disfigure, paintings owing much to Manet, etc. But less likely objects, cutting across media, genres, and epochs, sometimes have an equal chance of being evoked: To me, the model's body—her thigh, especially—has a monumentality that calls to mind Michelangelo's *Night from the Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici*, 1524–34, and the insidious eroticism of the scene

awakes to the sound of the first bars of Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1892–94). Such comparisons are qualitative but rarely evaluative: Deciding whether the Manet is on the level of the work of his predecessors, contemporaries, or successors, etc., matters much less than *elective affinities* (in the words of Goethe) or *family resemblances* (to cite Wittgenstein) based on feeling, mood, or free association.

The bag on the right in figure 4 contains a more or less rich quantity and variety of works of art, depending on the cultural background, level of education, social class, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and intensity of passion for art of the person who judges. Let's never forget that "This is art" is pronounced by a person with his or her own particular history, culture, and social background. We are all born with an empty bag, and we all carry that bag through life. We fill it little by little as we go along, building our personal mental art collection. At first other people filled our bag: Our parents, our educators, our peers, and the media taught us (1) the existence of the words "art" and "artist" and the way they are used in society; (2) to love the art they love (or, unwittingly, to rebel against their taste); (3) to progressively build a personal collection different from theirs.

Once this autonomy is attained (it never totally is), how does one judge aesthetically *if* "This is art"? The answer when the word "art" was red is still valid: by having the feeling *that* "this is art," the feeling of "art as such." But now that the word "art" is green, we understand that our feeling is both the product and the judge of a comparison between the candidate (on the left) and some content from our personal art collection (on the right). This comparison is aesthetic, which means that the mood and intensity of our feeling, as well as memories of past feelings, are the reflective vehicle through which the outcome is pronounced: "I feel that *this* is comparable with a number of exemplary examples from my collection that are acting as a standard of comparison." When we exert our aesthetic judgment on some new candidate for art, and in so doing add to our personal collection, we decide if the candidate has something in common with the content of our collection. When the medium is conventional, it is easy. In some cases—the most exciting—we must struggle to find an affinity between the candidate and our collection: It is as if a stranger were trying to penetrate a close-knit community. And in the most pleasurable cases, we cannot name the criterion of comparability that makes us judge that this is art. We have the vague feeling of a *je ne sais quoi* in common with the art we love, and we yield.

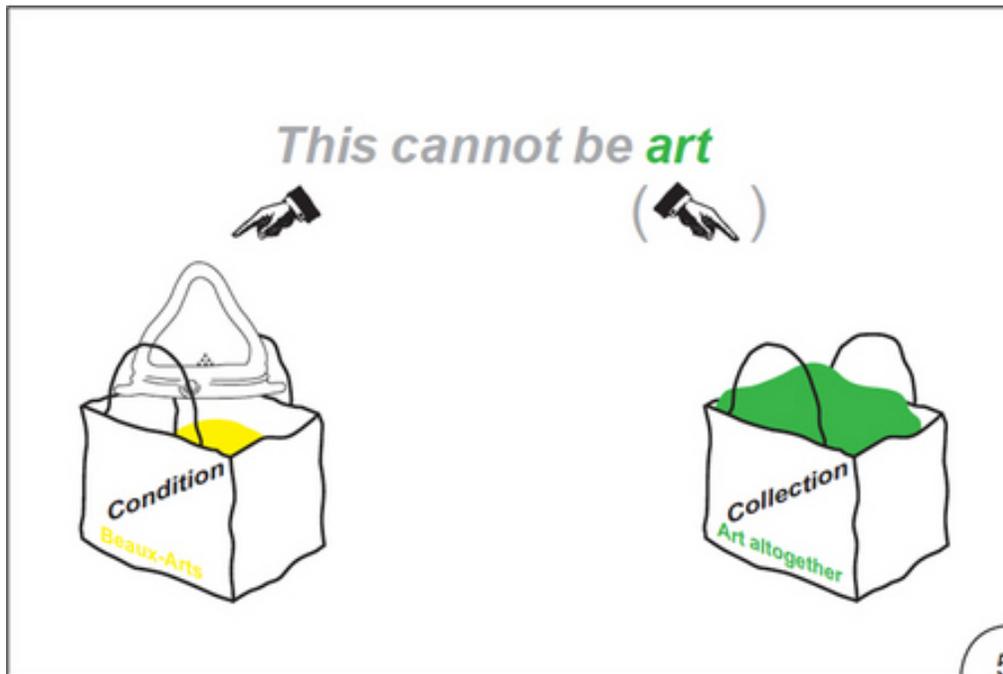
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It is from the experience of a seasoned art lover that we can best deduce how the aesthetic comparison works. A candidate for the name of art presents itself, and the art lover's brain spontaneously—and, I'd say, automatically and semi-unconsciously—scans his or her personal collection until it encounters comparable works of art. All criteria of comparison are welcome, even the most insignificant, the most absurd, or the least artistic (another corollary of the fact that anything can be art). Say that an artist comes up with a heap of coal. It so happens that I already have five heaps of coal (or slag or coke) in my bag: by Bernar Venet, Jannis Kounellis, Marcel Broodthaers, Reiner Ruthenbeck, and Mary Kelly. By judging that “this is art,” I deem that the heap of coal on the left is qualitatively comparable with—which doesn't mean qualitatively equal to—those of Venet, Kounellis, Broodthaers, Ruthenbeck, or Kelly. What was initially a random criterion of comparison has acquired an aesthetic meaning and opened the door to evaluation. (Is the heap of coal on the left as good a work of art as Venet's or Kelly's on the right? Does it differ enough from them? Etc.)

**AND NOW** let us turn to *Fountain's* scandal (figure 5). For even though Duchamp took great care not to provoke a scandal during the first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, *Fountain* was a scandalous work. The reaction of Bellows and Kent is testimony enough: Such a vulgar thing as a urinal was beyond the pale of what even the most liberal art lovers would accept. More mysterious is that *Fountain* remains a scandalous work today, even as we are totally blasé with regard to transgressions of social, moral, or sexual decency. The scandal that *Fountain* raises and should forever raise lies in what it reveals about the modern aesthetic judgment. Put Bellows and Kent in abeyance for a moment, and imagine the following: The most seasoned, the most cultivated, the most sophisticated art lover finds herself in 1917 facing a urinal as a candidate for the name of art. Her brain scans her collection as fast as the search function on your computer; nothing comparable comes up. Being exceptionally erudite and open-minded, she takes into account what she knows of the art of all places and all times; all nations, societies, and ethnic groups; all cultures, subcultures, and countercultures. Nothing

doing. She must conclude that a urinal is not comparable with anything artistic. No matter how hard she tries to widen her basis for comparison and to step into the shoes of an ideal art lover who would have put the entire artistic patrimony of humankind into her bag, she finally gives up: In 1917, in front of a urinal, it was impossible to pronounce an aesthetic judgment concluding, “This is art,” for lack of a basis for comparison. The result is not just the negative verdict “This is not art”; it is “This cannot be art.”



Kant had already noticed that when judgments of taste are not preceded by “I think that,” “I feel that,” “For me,” or other subjective qualifiers, they claim universal assent, and he argued that they do so legitimately. That claim doesn’t imply the claim to incarnate the ideal art lover who has extended her appreciation to all the art in the world.<sup>10</sup> Those two claims are independent, *except* in the case of the absolute judgment “This cannot be art.” *Fountain*’s exclusive scandal is to have provoked its censors to conflate both claims. To what effect? It follows from the way we constitute our personal art collection that it is made of comparable things (the green stuff in the bag on the right in figure 5). Like our personal one, the universal art lover’s collection—the bag labeled “art altogether”—is supposed to have been progressively filled through the succession of her innumerable aesthetic judgments, each declaring that the candidate was comparable with some exemplary examples from her collection.

Since each of our ideal art lover’s judgments is based on her feeling that “this is art,” the bag labeled “art altogether” ends up being filled with things united not so much by objective comparability as by the *feeling* of comparability among all works of art. Given that our ideal art lover is supposed to have filled her bag by identifying in turn with a person from every culture, subculture, and counterculture across time and space, in the end her sensitivity toward the global comparability of works of art presupposes a prodigious capacity for empathy with the whole of humankind, an out-of-this-world identification with its multiple cultural identities and differences, an uncanny insight into its many rapports with the mysteries of life and death, a

quasi-supernatural understanding of its yearnings and desires, flaws and contradictions—in sum, an extraordinary sensitivity to the properly human content and purport of works of art. What all works of art in the world have in common would thus be the material and formal incarnation in things—in objects, sensible phenomena—of the human condition, no less. Such would be the essence of art. We should not be too surprised that we have arrived at this definition of the essence of art via the maximization of the ways in which we fill our bag. The most common humanist view of art would have yielded the same definition. The surprise hits us when we take Bellows and Kent’s claim to incarnate the universal art lover seriously. Richard Mutt trapped them into producing the one exception that was enough to ruin the universal comparability of works of art—the one item that wouldn’t fit in the bag labeled “art altogether,” the one thing that declared the bankruptcy of all aesthetic theories based on taste and nothing else. The verdict with which Bellows and Kent rejected *Fountain*—“This cannot be art”—amounts to an indictment of the urinal’s claim to the status of art as literally inhuman.

**ONE CAN IMAGINE** how far-reaching the philosophical and political consequences of such a reading of *Fountain* might be for aesthetics.<sup>11</sup> I shall not venture onto this terrain here, except to suggest that only a theory of art that stands up to the inhuman will fully account for our reversal of Bellows and Kent’s indictment. The affirmation “This is art” must reckon with the exception. It ought to be strong enough to invert “This is not art” in spite of the validity of “This cannot be art.” The burden of that affirmation falls on the copula in our anatomy of a sentence, the word “is,” the only word in “This is art” we have not yet dissected.

The copula declares that “this,” the urinal on the left in figure 6, is qualitatively comparable with “art altogether,” in spite of “this” being the one exception to the universal comparability of “art altogether.” It should be clear that “is” reads here as “ought to be.” Bellows and Kent didn’t feel the presence, in Richard Mutt’s urinal, of the properly human *je ne sais quoi* that would have established the object’s evasive commonality with the global art collection they claimed as their basis for comparison. When they decided that the urinal was devoid of that *je ne sais quoi*, it had to be in the name of the *idea* that the object ought to possess this ineffable essence in order to be art. To reverse their verdict is only feasible on behalf of the same idea, the idea that all the things bearing the name “art” must have—ought to have—a *je ne sais quoi* in common that makes them comparable. We cannot deem *Fountain* a work of art unless we entertain the *idea* that there ought to be something common to all the art in the world, even in the face of the one exception *Fountain* exemplifies. To that idea, I give the name “art itself,” and in the name of that idea, I now move “this,” the urinal on the left, to place it in my personal art collection, the bag on the right (figure 6).

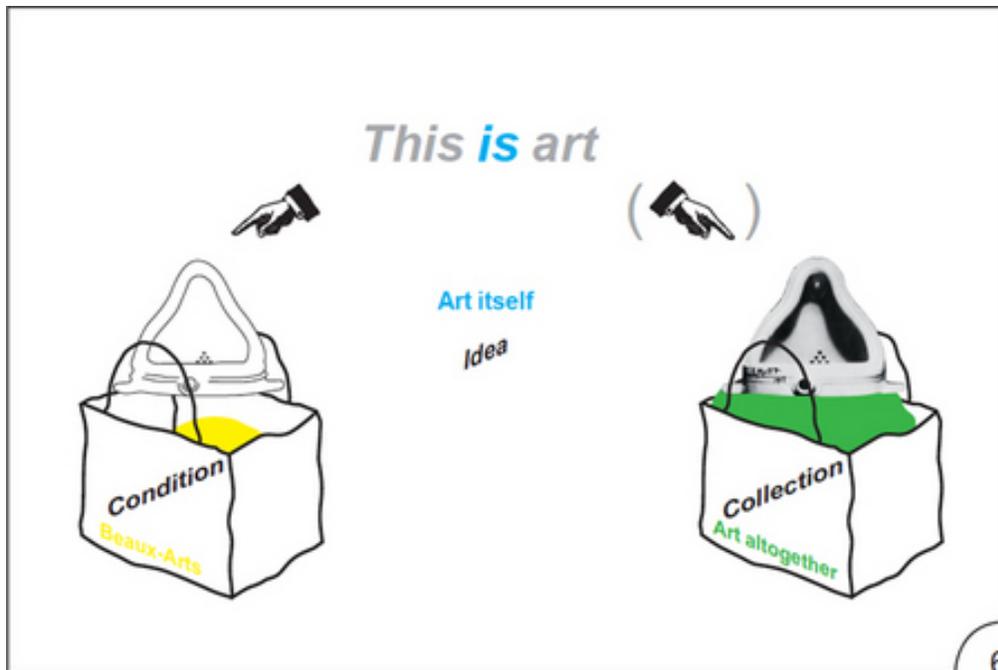
Notice that in order to declare, “This cannot be art,” with absolute certainty, one must *be* this ideal art lover who would have learned to appreciate all the art in the world by identifying in turn with a member of every culture, subculture, and counterculture. This urinal summons a universal art lover who does not exist, who cannot exist. That is its true scandal. The paradox is striking: Only someone who cannot exist can say, “This cannot be art,” in confidence. But Bellows and Kent did just that. They claimed to incarnate someone who could not exist. They dared judge as if, instead of the limited art collection that was their actual cultural baggage, they had “art altogether” in their bag. “Art altogether” is the name I give to the universal basis for comparison that an individual is required to possess in order to declare with absolute certainty that

something, anything—a urinal, for example—*cannot* possibly be art. Of course, that basis for comparison is beyond reach, since even the most seasoned, cultivated, and sophisticated art lover cannot hope to possess it.

Now, don't jump to the conclusion that Bellows and Kent were wrong; that they were insufferably pretentious in their claim to incarnate the universal art lover; that this was the trap Duchamp had set for them; and that we are thus entitled to correct them and to rehabilitate *Fountain* without further ado. That's not it at all. The scandal is that Bellows and Kent were right. They were right in claiming that a urinal could not be art for anyone. And they were right to incarnate the universal art lover. Those two legitimate claims are independent from one another, and yet, *in this unique case*, articulated to one another.

A theory of art that accounts for the passage from the Beaux-Arts system to the Art-in-General system should be valid for the aesthetic *regimes* of both systems, and offer an articulation of the passage from one regime to the other. Bellows and Kent were subjectively stuck in the Beaux-Arts system, inasmuch as they were compelled to judge according to the beaux-arts *regime*; but they were objectively in the Art-in-General system, inasmuch as the objective institutional consequence of their no-jury rule was that art could be anything a member presented. They were right in maintaining that a urinal could not be art according to the beaux-arts regime: No available theory of taste was able to accommodate a urinal as art. And they were right in claiming to incarnate the universal art lover: It was the only way they could issue their negative, absolute judgment in accordance with the beaux-arts regime, from within the Art-in-General system. Because it claims to be absolute, such a negative judgment plays an essential role in ushering in the art-in-general regime that allows *us* to invert Bellows and Kent's rejection and to recognize *Fountain* as a work of art. When Ad Reinhardt, whom I cited in the epigraph to last month's essay, said, "You can only make absolute statements negatively," I believe he implied a maximization of the range of comparisons of the sort I imagined our ideal art lover capable of, as well as its ultimate failure: A judgment ceases to be comparative and becomes *negatively absolute* when all possible comparisons have been tried and all attempts at comparison have failed. Bellows and Kent claimed to have gone through that comparative process when they judged that *this*—the urinal in front of the index finger in figures 3 and 5—could not be art because it was absolutely not comparable with anything in the universal collection called "art altogether."<sup>9</sup>

[Continued on next page]



“Art itself” does not name the essence of art, of which we will never know more than what we can learn from the endless inquiry that works of art conduct into the human condition. “Art itself” names the idea—the *mere* idea—of universal comparability of works of art, an idea that has become mandatory for us to call upon because of *Fountain*’s exceptional status.

Without going into the philosophical reasons why this is so, let me state the obvious art-historical ones. To judge that this urinal *is* art, in spite of the feeling it elicits of an absolute incomparability with all pre-1917 art, is to make the one aesthetic judgment needed to properly acknowledge receipt of Duchamp’s message. Failure to pass that judgment leads to one of two impasses: Either we throw *Fountain* and all its posterity on the ash heap of history and refuse to recognize the reality of the world we live in; or we espouse the absurd belief that fifty years of post-Duchamp art practices have accomplished such an absolute break with the aesthetic past of art that the concept of art has become unrecognizable. So, *Fountain* is art. But its presence in the museum proves nothing; you and I must confirm and reconfirm its art status at all times—a “Duchamp effect” more tenuous and yet more compelling than the great man’s “influence” on every generation of artists since Conceptual art began. There is nothing that *cannot* be art, not even a urinal: This is what “*Fountain* is art” entails.

I keep wondering about the intuitive truth Enwezor hit upon with his claim that “is” and “can be” amounted to the same thing in the case of Duchamp’s readymades. It is true only for *Fountain*, but its truth is profound. The reflective aesthetic judgment that confirms or reconfirms *Fountain*’s art status follows the feedback loop of the mind that restates our initial postulate that all urinals, and indeed all things in the universe, *can be* art. To make that postulate has now become both a theoretical necessity and a quasi-ethical obligation, because there is no empirical proof that we live in a world where anything can be art and where anyone can be an artist. Duchamp the angel was no prophet of that kind of liberation. But those, like John Cage, who felt the wind of liberty ruffle their feathers were not entirely wrong to thank him for it.

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## NOTES

All diagrams designed by the author.

1. Quoted from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 39e.

2. Where I see two distinct *aesthetic regimes*, Rancière sees only one, which he opposes to the premodern *representational regime*. See Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2000). For the English translation, see *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

3. "There is thus no empirical proof that everything can be art, and no empirical proof, either, of the contrary. I am happy for the time being to call my starting point a postulate, and to beg the reader to adopt it as if it were an established fact. What matters is whether it is fruitful." See my "Pardon My French," *Artforum*, October 2013, 249.

4. See my "Don't Shoot the Messenger," *Artforum*, November 2013, 266.

5. Our sentence is not anonymously inscribed on some institutional support, such as in god we trust on dollar bills.

6. Francis Naumann, ed., "I Shock Myself: Excerpts from the Autobiography of Beatrice Wood," *Arts Magazine*, May 1977, 135–36. The version with Bellows substituted for Kent (which I quoted in last month's essay) is in Wood's autobiography, *I Shock Myself* (Ojai, CA: Dillingham Press, 1985), 29–30.

7. William Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp: Fountain* (Houston: Houston Fine Art Press, 1989), 25.

8. The question of whether *Fountain* validates theories of taste for the negative judgment "This is not art" is more delicate. I would tentatively say that it validates them for "This is not art" in the strong sense of "I have the feeling that this is not art" and not in the weak sense of "I don't have the feeling that this is art."

9. This absolute incomparability must be distinguished from the judgment of relative incomparability with which we assess the artists we value the most or who puzzle us the most. An exclamation like "Shakespeare is incomparable!" may convey unrestricted or ambivalent praise, perhaps praise of the kind Wittgenstein had in mind when he wrote: "I do not believe that Shakespeare can be set alongside any other poet. Was he perhaps a *creator of language* rather than a poet? / I could only stare in wonder at Shakespeare; never do anything with him." Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 84e.

10. "Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* is a masterpiece" claims that all should agree but not that the speaker has compared the painting with all masterpieces. She found a basis for comparison with a few works in her collection that she deems masterpieces, and that was enough.

11. In his book *L'Objet du siècle* (The Object of the Century) (Paris: Verdier, 1998), the French psychoanalyst Gérard Wajcman has maintained, against all chronology but with deep insight into the inhumanity of the dreadful twentieth century, that Duchamp's readymade (he singles out the bicycle wheel, but occasionally switches to the urinal) and Malevich's *Black Square* are the two objects that place us with wide-open eyes in front of *absence as such*—and he had the gas chambers in mind.