

**Thierry de Duve on the Avant Garde and the Invention of Art
Parts 1 & 2 from 6 essays** in successive issues of ArtForum,
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Pardon My French

Thierry de Duve

[...month, historian and philosopher *THIERRY DE DUVE* returns to the subject of his landmark “The Readymade and the Tube of Paint,” first published in these pages in 1986. If that text changed the...](#)

October 2013

THIS YEAR, the 1913 Armory Show turns one hundred. That watershed exhibition—together with the emergence of the readymade—has long been seen as a pivotal moment in modernism’s relentlessly revolutionary progress, blowing the category of modern art wide open and ushering in the avant-garde’s signal conditions of shock and rupture. (This centennial will be celebrated by a number of exhibitions and events, including “The Armory Show at 100: Modern Art and Revolution,” opening at the New-York Historical Society on October 11.)

But what if we’ve missed something? What if our narrative of the avant-garde and the route it traces is too narrow, too easy? And what if, as a result, we have misunderstood our contemporary institutions of art? In a series of essays for *Artforum* launching this month, historian and philosopher **THIERRY DE DUVE returns to the subject of his landmark “The Readymade and the Tube of Paint,” first published in these pages in 1986. If that text changed the way we understood the production of art, de Duve now overturns our understanding of the invention of the avant-garde—and presents Marcel Duchamp anew, as the messenger rather than the creator of a far earlier sea change in culture. Spanning three centuries, de Duve’s provocative argument leads to a riveting reinterpretation of the very concept and status of art.**



Piero Manzoni signing a model during the making of a short film for Filmgiornale SEDI, Milan, 1961. © Fondazione Piero Manzoni, Milan.

Theorization comes easily; it requires nothing more than imagination, fantasy. Myths are theories that have stiffened. To debunk a myth is to flex a countertheory.¹

—Richard Shiff

THEORIES IN ART HISTORY, as scholar Richard Shiff suggests in this beautiful passage I have chosen as an epigraph, are easily fabricated. And when fabricated theories age, they stiffen but are not abandoned; they become myths. Yet countertheories capable of debunking a myth can be flexed—made pliant and nimble, never contrived or fantasized. Economy of means and amenity toward as many facts as possible are their major qualities. Imagination is not in the art historian’s toolbox.

These days, a seemingly endless stream of books, articles, and questionnaires lament the lack of theory to help us navigate the globalized land- and web-scapes of current art. As

Hal Foster has recently written, introducing one such questionnaire on “the contemporary” in the journal *October*, “such paradigms as ‘the neo-avant-garde’ and ‘postmodernism,’ which once oriented some art and theory, have run into the sand, and, arguably, no models of much explanatory reach or intellectual force have risen in their stead.”² Although I am not sure that models and paradigms are desirable when it comes to art in the making, I share Foster’s diagnosis that “the neo-avant-garde” and “postmodernism” have run into the sand. Why have they? If there are answers at all to this question, they must be historical; pursuing them is not a task for the critic of the contemporary, but rather for the historian. What are the chances that “the neo-avant-garde” and “postmodernism” were not adequately theorized because the concepts they supposedly replaced or criticized were misconstrued in the first place? Does the malaise around the *neo* and the *post* not call for a reassessment—a reappraisal, perhaps, a reinterpretation, certainly—of the avant-garde and modernism?

I want to take a neglected route to such a reassessment: the aesthetic route. It is so rarely followed by art historians that I’m sure my mention of it conjures up specters that have nothing to do with it—paths of influence, evolutions of style, histories of taste, hagiographic biographies of artists, formalist genealogies, epiphanies of visuality, the construction of a canon—all things very foreign to the aesthetic route as I conceive of it, which is more like a brand of social art history pursuing an investigation dictated by aesthetic questions. First of all, as a road—a way for getting from A to B, a method for moving in culture and gathering information along the way—the aesthetic route is a line of inquiry, but it is not necessarily narrative or chronological; it can also follow a logical reasoning, a philosophical reflection, an introspection, or an aesthetic judgment, all mental acts that are extratemporal or reflexive. The vast majority of the sources consulted along the way are not aesthetic, but why they are consulted is often motivated by the desire to find or construct aesthetic facts. Second, the aesthetic route starts from the following premise: Works of art proceed from decisions of all kinds—technical, ideological, economic, to name just a few—some of which are aesthetic or have a determining aesthetic component. Those are crucial to the status of the works *as art*, as works *of art*. Whatever the medium of a work of art, aesthetic decision is the stuff it is made of. Or, to put things slightly differently: Whatever other decisions enter the work, aesthetic decision has the last word. There is no exception to this law; I am not saying that aesthetic decision *should* have the last word, I am stating a fact. For example, when the “director’s cut” of a film is released years after the producers’ version, we are not witnessing the vindication of aesthetic decisions over commercial ones. The latter are also aesthetic decisions; though motivated by profit, they are nevertheless aesthetic. Moreover, the commercial reasons adduced also boil down to aesthetic ones, since they are dictated by speculations about the aesthetic preferences of the film’s targeted audience. Consequently, a great deal of the aesthetic decisions entering a work of art are not made by the artist. Most are actually default decisions handed down to the artist by previous artists, by the artist’s tradition, teachers, patrons, commissioners, or employers. Some are anachronistic, inasmuch as they find their way back into the work seemingly against the flow of time. Such are the judgments of the critics, the work’s reception by a narrow or broad audience, its integration into the discourse of art history, its assimilation by the culture or by society at large.

Finally, as a retracing of historical steps, the aesthetic route does not set norms; it deals with aesthetic decisions that have already been made, whether they are embedded in the works themselves or found in artists' manuals, manifestos, art criticism, and so on. The aesthetic route only becomes prescriptive—but still not normative—with the aesthetic decisions of the one who walks it, at which point it may or may not ask for a revision of the historical record. For art historians to put their own judgments on the block is an important way of recognizing that their intervention in the construction of a canon—where prescription does become norm—is an open-ended process, always vulnerable to the verdicts of future generations. Actually, once an aesthetic route has been traveled and is retrospectively examined, it produces a self-conscious art-historical “narrative” best described as aesthetic jurisprudence—a concept much less authoritarian than that of a canon. Works of art regularly summon and are summoned by other works of art to appear in a permanently active court of appeals—a court that is prone to protect the verdicts of the past against aesthetic revisionism dictated by current fashions and also ready to revise them when new historical questions are raised, new objects of study surface, new ways of art writing prove necessary. Now, to quote Fareed Zakaria, my favorite political commentator: Let's get started.

THE FRENCH TO BE PARDONED in this essay's title is the exclamation “*N'importe quoi!*” uttered in a tone of exasperation or unmitigated contempt during a conversation about contemporary art, with eyes rolled to the ceiling, a pouting mouth spewing lament, a deep sigh, a shrug of the shoulders, or a dismissive gesture of the hand. Although its dictionary translation would give you a puritan “whatever,” “Anything goes! @#?!#!” is more like it—pronounced, of course, with expletives, in the same exasperated tone. The semantic range of the expression is staggeringly wide but always derogatory, from a menial “My two-year old can do that” to a scatological “It's crap,” via the usual demagogical protest against elitism and hermeticism. Applied indiscriminately, “*N'importe quoi!*” accuses contemporary art of being empty, ridiculous, banal, random, arrogant, badly made, meaningless, obscene, absurd, stupid, obscure, grotesque, ugly, purely commercial, merely technical, creepy, incomprehensible, snobbish, shocking for the sake of shocking, worthless, disgusting, childish, or worse, infantile—or all of the above. (It would be fun to illustrate each one of these epithets with a work by Paul McCarthy—which really says something about the quality and relevance of that artist's oeuvre.)

It is sometimes useful to adopt the point of view of the adversary when looking for some truth too well hidden or too blatantly displayed. The grain of truth in “*N'importe quoi!*” lies in what the expression literally says rather than in the aggressive feelings it conveys or the severe judgment it expresses. People who use it as a blanket term to eruct against what they perceive as the decadence or the insignificance of contemporary art unwittingly recognize that *n'importe quoi* can, today, be art. Anything goes, indeed. Please note that I'm not saying: Anything can be contemporary art. I'm saying: Anything can be art, today. I want to avoid assuming a category of contemporary art recursively defined by its openness to the *n'importe quoi*, however positively viewed or subtly analyzed.³ Such a category implies that some of today's artists are not contemporary because, for them, it is not true that anything goes. Let us dodge that misunderstanding straightaway. In my view, “Anything goes” is not at all a paradoxical rule of artmaking that removes all rules

and that artists are at liberty to endorse or not. Rather, it is a condition that all contemporary artists share because it is not one of their making.

Stripped of its anger or its anxiety, “Anything goes” states a fact of our cultural moment: It is nowadays *technically feasible* and *institutionally legitimate* to make art from anything whatsoever. Such is the starting point of this series of articles—its starting point but not its thesis. I have no intention of demonstrating that anything can be art, or, for that matter, of proving the opposite. Both attempts are futile because they are out of reach. I would have to review, one by one, all the materials, forms, mediums, styles, contents, and tools available to artists, and never come across even one material, form, medium, style, content, or tool that could not possibly yield art. Only if my quest were demonstrably infinite would I have made my point. But my point is not demonstrable, precisely for the reason that the quest is infinite. 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.

THE “ANYTHING GOES” CONDITION seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon. Neither a court painter under the Ming dynasty nor a Baroque sculptor working for the church was allowed such unbridled freedom. The relevant question is thus: Since when? Since when is it the case that anything can be art? Let the answer take the shape of one of the *Boîtes noires* (Black Boxes) made in 1962 by the French artist Ben Vautier, who signs his works “Ben.”

Pardon my French, or rather Ben’s, as scrawled on the side of his object: DEPUIS DUCHAMP ON PEUT METTRE N’IMPORTE QUOI DANS CETTE BOÎTE (since Duchamp one is allowed to put anything into this box). With tongue-in-cheek (and quite Duchampian) humor, Ben acknowledges his illustrious predecessor, Marcel Duchamp, for having made it possible to put anything into the box—the drawer, the folder, the concept, the category—of art. That Ben’s *Black Box* should be interpreted as the “box of art” is implied by its own claim to the name of art and by the status of its author as an artist who openly walks in the footsteps of his chosen master: I, Ben Vautier, feel authorized by Duchamp to make art out of whatever I fancy, and you may feel the same. I’m bringing you the good news—or is it a warning?—that anything whatsoever fits in the art box. Since when? *Since Duchamp*.

From our contemporary vantage point, more than a decade into the twenty-first century, Ben’s answer sounds so self-evident that we must pause in order to unpack the reasoning behind it. First, to what exact time frame does “since Duchamp” refer? Duchamp was born in 1887 and died in 1968. To put things pompously, in the Latin dear to art historians, 1887 provides the *terminus post quem* and 1962 the *terminus ante quem* of our question. If we take Ben’s word for it, this means the concept of art was not open to the arrival of the *n’importe quoi* before Duchamp’s birth—giving him a couple of decades to grow up and mature, this pushes the date to the 1910s—and has already registered the *n’importe quoi* by 1962, the date of Ben’s *Black Box*. Duchamp was still alive when Ben bounced back to him the news he himself had been the first to broadcast. As we shall see, the proper dating of “since Duchamp” involves both the 1910s and the 1960s, but let’s

not rush, for Ben's box prompts another question, which we should address first. What particular achievement of Duchamp's does Ben have in mind?

The latter's own practice of signing found objects makes it clear that "since Duchamp" does not mean since Duchamp's *Large Glass*, 1915–23, or *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)*, 1912. Ben's box is willing to accommodate anything and everything because it already contains all of Duchamp's readymades, from the *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913 to the urinal called *Fountain* of 1917, once the most infamous and now, if we are to believe a 2004 poll of five hundred art experts, "the most influential modern art work of all time."⁴ *Pace* the experts, *influential* is the wrong word. Ben was not influenced by Duchamp. He felt *authorized* by Duchamp, which is quite different. Whether it is *by* Duchamp that he felt authorized is not even so clear: *Since* Duchamp doesn't mean *thanks to* Duchamp. Ben must have sensed the pressure as much as the liberation, and he felt compelled to burn his bridges. Duchamp's authorization closed down on him in such a way that he had no choice but to act on his subjective impression that, since Duchamp's readymades, since *Fountain*, all artists have received permission to make art from whatever they want. He might even have sensed that "all artists" is too restrictive: The impersonal *on peut . . .* suggests "anyone" instead. Let *Fountain* thus summarize, symbolize, or epitomize the reasoning behind Ben's *Black Box*: When a urinal is art, then anything and everything can be art, and chances are that anybody can be an artist. *Fountain's* presence in the art box legitimates the subsequent landing of any imaginable thing in it and the potential promotion of the man on the street to the rank of artist. Ben knows what he owes Duchamp: precisely the news his *Black Box* broadcasts. In spite of his egomania (true or feigned, often boasted), there is humility in his *Black Box*, as if he were saying: Duchamp is the real messenger and I, Ben, am only acknowledging receipt of his telegram and passing it on.

We might say that in 1917—the date *Fountain* proudly bears, along with the mysterious signature "R. Mutt"—Duchamp put a message in the mail, and that it had surely arrived by 1962. Ben's *Black Box* is an acknowledgment of receipt. It registers the fact that *Fountain* has landed in the art box. Dates are symbolic as much as factual: They form constellations, as Walter Benjamin would say, clusters of events and meanings, anticipations, belated effects. DEPUIS DUCHAMP is a conundrum of reception history framed by the 1910s, the decade of the first readymades, and the '60s, the decade when the art world as a whole seems to reconfigure itself as post-Duchamp.

The year 1962 is as good a symbolic date to start from as any. It was a prolific year for Ben. Daniel Spoerri and Arman had briefed him on Duchamp a few years before; he had recently met George Maciunas in London and joined Fluxus; he was assimilating John Cage while still revering Isidore Isou; he was jealous of Yves Klein's megalomania and admiring George Brecht for making art from the simplest acts of everyday life; he was sending letters to the winds not knowing yet they were mail art; he was reveling in Duchamp's authorization with a sense of exhilarated omnipotence. In fact, he was so inebriated by his new liberty that he frantically began to appropriate and sign *everything*, including God.⁵ At the time, Ben was far from being the only artist to feel excited and empowered by Duchamp's readymades. Arman, also living in Nice, France, was churning out "Accumulations" by the dozen, while in New York, Claes Oldenburg was

putting an extraordinary bric-a-brac of mock commodities, painted with streaks of strident colors, up for sale in *The Store*. And then, of course, there was Andy Warhol. The poet, artist, and AIDS activist John Giorno recalls an evening in May 1963, when he and Warhol went to an opening at the Whitney Museum of American Art and met Duchamp for the first time. Here is Giorno's account of the event:

There was a crowd, a big semicircle of people at the museum entrance waiting to get in. Andy and I stood on the hot tar street at the edge of the crowd, and waited.

Someone famous arrived in a taxi. An invisible energy rippled through the mass of people, a visceral, tangible wave of excitement. "It's like royalty arriving," I said, "or a movie star. Who?"

"Duchamp!" said Andy.

"Have you met?"

"No!" Andy became very excited, overwrought. His forehead sweated and he started shaking, his hands and body trembled. He pushed his way through the crowd, and pushed faster, carving a path, bumped and knocked into people, who gave him dirty looks, and was rushing somewhere. I held on with two fingers to the sleeve of Andy's loose sport shirt, and got swept along with him. I understood the expression, holding on to somebody's coat tails. I didn't know what was happening, but I was not going to get left behind. It was like water skiing, or surfing on wind, we were going so fast I could feel the wind. It was the only time I ever saw Andy do anything physically aggressive. We forged a semicircle through the crowd, and landed at the curb directly in front of the museum entrance.

Duchamp, from the taxi, walked straight into Andy, and there stood David Whitney, waiting to receive Duchamp for the museum, who by chance, introduced them. Perfectly timed!

"Ohhh!" said Andy. Duchamp and Andy shook hands, and looked in each other's eyes. Duchamp looked into Andy's eyes, and nodded his head imperceptibly. In the instant, he acknowledged Andy, knew his work, and approved. They had a great, non-verbal moment of communication, beyond thought.⁶

This is the very stuff of mythmaking. It is not Warhol acknowledging Duchamp's telegram—he had done so brilliantly a year earlier with his exhibition of row after row of *Campbell's Soup Cans* on shelves at Irving Blum's Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. It is Warhol engineering Duchamp's acknowledgment in return. The story may be apocryphal. Other sources have Warhol meeting Duchamp at the opening of the latter's retrospective, "By or of Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy" at the Pasadena Art (now Norton Simon) Museum in Pasadena, California, five months later, in October 1963. Warhol would have scheduled his next show at Ferus within days to make sure the encounter would happen. Either way, Warhol's eagerness to meet the great man is on the record, and the year of their meeting is definitely 1963.

Curated by the ever-alert Walter Hopps, “By or of Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy” was the artist’s very first museum survey. Already a cult figure among avant-garde artists, he was not totally unknown, but his works had seldom been seen outside of the rare exhibition (either a large group museum survey or small gallery exhibitions up for a short time, including the important 1953 Sidney Janis show on Dada in New York), with the exception of those in the Arensberg Collection, on view in Chicago in 1949 and at the Philadelphia Museum of Art since 1954. Although *Life* magazine had published a remarkably well-informed article by Winthrop Sargeant as early as 1952, Duchamp’s reputation with the average citizen was rarely more specific than the image of an eccentric artist who preferred playing chess to making works.⁷ The 1963 Pasadena retrospective suddenly changed that. Not that chess and eccentricity were replaced overnight by more serious information: The most spectacular photo of Duchamp at the time shows the artist playing chess in the exhibition with a naked woman.⁸ But it was the first comprehensive display of his oeuvre a large audience was likely to attend. Thus far only art-world insiders had a sense of his importance; now his star was rising fast. As the decade moved on, his work was increasingly perceived as more relevant to current practices than Picasso’s. Reviewing Duchamp’s retrospective at the Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery in 1965 for the *New York Times*, John Canaday estimated that Duchamp was “about even with Picasso . . . as the living godhead of modern art,” only to add:

*Picasso, if you are a Duchamp man, is left behind in a cloud of intellectual dust as the last of the humanists, while Duchamp is the man who knows that nothing—art least of all—is important, but that all of it can be fun.*⁹

Artists were registering the fun and lack of importance of art in a variety of ways that belied Canaday’s comment more often than not. Duchamp’s American reception by Oldenburg and Warhol’s generation of Pop artists had been prepared in the ’50s by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, not to mention John Cage, Merce Cunningham, David Tudor, and others, for whom chance, lightness, and freedom in art were more than just fun. The timing and the seriousness were similar in Europe for Richard Hamilton and the British inventors of Pop art, as well as for Klein and Manzoni, soon followed by Ben, Arman, the Nouveaux Réalistes and the Fluxus artists. By the mid-’60s, virtually all significant young artists on both sides of the Atlantic, South America included, had their eyes on Duchamp or were under his spell. Probably the most literal reception of Duchamp’s message was a mock public toilet installed by Roberto Platé at the “*Experiencias 1968*” show at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella in Buenos Aires.¹⁰ And a year later, once Conceptual art had begun to receive official recognition and Duchamp had passed away, extravagant claims began to be made on his behalf. In his seminal 1969 text *Art After Philosophy*, Joseph Kosuth went so far as to profess: “The function of art, as a question, was first raised by Marcel Duchamp. In fact it is Marcel Duchamp whom we can credit with giving art its own identity.”¹¹ A claim this bold should give us pause. Was art devoid of identity before Duchamp? Or did Duchamp single-handedly change the identity of art? Did Kosuth not mistake the messenger of an ontological metamorphosis for its author? Was this metamorphosis really ontological?

The big questions will have to wait. From the point of view of the question “Since when?” Kosuth’s claim is a sure sign that Duchamp’s telegram had arrived. By the end of

the '60s, it was in everyone's mailbox, and everyone was hurrying to find an adequate response. Between Ben's (the most straightforward) and Kosuth's (the most elaborate) a small decade had passed, in which the most pervasive response, the most successful because the most promising and liberating, was already contained in the reasoning behind Ben's *Black Box*. I'll call it the Duchamp syllogism: When a urinal is art, anything can be art; and when anything can be art, anybody can be an artist. Pardon my French, or rather Robert Filliou's, this time: "*Oui, oui, voilà, oui! Tout le monde sera un artiste.*" The future tense is telling. It is the signature of utopian thinking.

Next month: "Part II: Don't Shoot the Messenger"

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NOTES

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1. Richard Shiff, "Every Shiny Object Wants an Infant Who Will Love It," *Art Journal* 70, no. 1 (2011): 11.
2. Hal Foster, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary,'" *October*, no. 130 (Fall 2009): 3.
3. For such a subtle analysis, see Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
4. "A white gentlemen's urinal has been named the most influential modern art work of all time. Marcel Duchamp's Fountain came top of a poll of 500 art experts in the run-up to this year's Turner Prize which takes place on Monday. Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907) was second, with Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Diptych* from 1962 coming third." "Duchamp's Urinal tops art survey" BBC News, last modified December 1, 2004, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4059997.stm.
5. The most complete list of things, gestures, ideas, and claims constituting Ben's art practice in 1962 is to be found in *Moi, Ben, je signe*, a mimeographed pamphlet he issued in 1963. An augmented facsimile edition was published by Lebeer Hossmann Éditeurs, Brussels, in 1975. See pp. 12–18.
6. John Giorno, "A Letter to the Editor," in *Twisted Pair: Marcel Duchamp/Andy Warhol* (Pittsburgh: Andy Warhol Museum, 2010), 22. Published as a brochure in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name.
7. Winthrop Sargeant, "Dada's Daddy," *Life*, April 28, 1952, 100–108, 111.
8. Her name is Eve Babitz. She is alive and well, and a witty member of the LA art scene, who knows how to prolong her "fifteen minutes of fame."

9. John Canaday, “Leonardo Duchamp,” *New York Times*, January 17, 1965, X19. Rosalind Krauss, for her part, sees in “Duchamp’s eclipse of Picasso as the most important artist of the century” one of the three things that “happened to make it irrefutable that the specific medium had fallen onto the trash heap of history.” Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 20.

10. The work was among the counterproposals submitted to Jorge Romero Brest, the director of the Instituto Torcuato di Tella, where the show was held, when the artists (among them David Lamelas, Oscar Bony, and Antonio Trotta) refused the theme of the relations between art and technology he had first proposed. See Jorge Glusberg, *Art in Argentina* (Milan: Giancarlo Politi, 1986), 17–18.

11. Joseph Kosuth, “Art After Philosophy” in *Art After Philosophy and After* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 18.

Don't Shoot the Messenger

Thierry de Duve

[THE SECOND IN A SERIES of new essays on the avant-garde for Artforum, historian and philosopher *THIERRY DE DUVE* picks up where he left off last month - contemplating the reception of Marcel...](#)

[November 2013](#)



View of “International Exhibition of Modern Art” (The Armory Show), 1913, 69th Regiment Armory, New York. Photo: Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

IN THE SECOND IN A SERIES of new essays on the avant-garde for *Artforum*, historian and philosopher [THIERRY DE DUVE](#) picks up where he left off last month—contemplating the reception of Marcel Duchamp’s iconic readymade *Fountain* upon its first appearance, in 1917, and then in a 1960s culture steeped in utopic ambition. Looking anew at long held myths of modernism, de Duve here examines the artistic and institutional legacy of the most notorious artwork of our time, which was rejected by the Society of Independent Artists, only to have a monumental effect—and a nearly equally consequential misprision—in the twentieth century.

The danger remains that he’ll get out of the valise we put him in. So long as he remains locked up— —John Cage, “26 Statements Re Duchamp”

IN 1917, MARCEL DUCHAMP put a message in the mail stating that anything could be art. The message, in the guise of a urinal, did not arrive at its destination until the 1960s, whereupon the whole Western art world reconfigured itself as “post-Duchamp.” Thirty years later, the message’s arrival was still making ripples: In 1994, the editors of the journal *October* devoted an entire issue to them; they titled it “The Duchamp Effect.”¹ Another nine years down the road, and said effect began to draw serious criticism from the field of postcolonial studies. Thus Okwui Enwezor:

The Duchamp effect was the most traditional view, because what it purports to do is

*delineate the supremacy of the artist: the artist as not only a form giver but also a name giver. It is the artist who decides what an object of art is or what it can be, rather than the decision being a result of progressive, formal transformation of the medium of art. For Duchamp, it is not tradition, but the artist who not only decides what the work of art is but also controls its narrative of interpretation.*²

The problem with this statement is not its implicit critique of the Western ethnocentrism of *October*. That point, addressed elsewhere in the article, is well taken.³ The problem lies with the many assumptions Enwezor makes on the editors' behalf regarding the "Duchamp effect." They were careful not to title their special issue "Duchamp's Effect." Enwezor misses the nuance: He lends the messenger authorship of the message and then infers the "supremacy of the artist," a very common error and the symptom of a fundamental misreading. I don't see that Duchamp was able—or wanted, for that matter—to control the interpretations his work has spawned. What twentieth-century artist's work has generated more divergent readings than Duchamp's, with "narratives" ranging from incest to courtly love to alchemy to the Kabbalah to Mallarméan poetry to Lacanian punning? Regarding the artist as "name giver," Enwezor is closer to Duchamp's "pictorial nominalism," yet he makes the same mistake of lending him too much. Duchamp surely saw to it that the name *art* be given to his readymades, but he never—I insist, never—gave them that name himself;⁴ a great deal of the effectiveness of the Duchamp effect is due to his withdrawal from traditional artistic agency and to his redefinition of authorship on novel, much less deterministic grounds.⁵

Indeterminacy was very much part of the Duchamp effect in the '50s—witness John Cage. The '60s was a decade when the name *art* was up for grabs: Anyone could claim it, everyone would re-define it, artists certainly had no monopoly over it—witness Michel Claura, Seth Siegelaub, Harald Szeemann, or Lucy Lippard. Further, when Enwezor speaks of the "medium of art," he shows that he has not truly grasped the message Duchamp put in the mail. Art is not a medium. Painting, sculpture, music, poetry, cinema are media, but art—art-in-general—is not. When anything can be art, we find ourselves, as Rosalind Krauss would say, in a "post-medium condition."⁶ Finally, what I find most intriguing in Enwezor's quick critique of the Duchamp effect is his claim that the artist decides "what an object of art *is or what it can be*" (emphasis mine). If I did not believe that Enwezor intuitively hit upon an important truth with the equivalence of "is" and "can be," I would not have dissected his statement with such critical scrutiny. I must ask the reader's patience, for we have a long way to go before I can address that truth.⁷

EVEN IF THE DUCHAMP EFFECT means something quite different from Duchamp's effect, *effect* is still similar to *influence*. Both concepts imply definitive causal links that carry an excessive weight of determination. Acknowledging receipt of a message, however, is a very different process. The mailman who asks you to acknowledge receipt of a registered letter warns you that the acknowledgment will be sent back to the sender—in this case, to a sender who has been mythically construed to perform an acknowledgment in return.⁸ In this back and forth specularly may lie another reason for the effectiveness of the Duchamp effect: It plays itself out in an echo chamber. In that sense, the more magazines, critics, historians, theorists, and journalists join in with *October* in analyzing and deconstructing the Duchamp effect, the more they amplify it

and distract attention from the content of the message—i. e., from the news that it is now technically feasible and institutionally legitimate to make art from anything whatsoever.



View of “First Annual Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists,” 1917, Grand Central Palace, New York. Photo: Arensberg Archives/ Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives.

Duchamp was merely the messenger of that news, the whistle-blower. He did not own the news channels: Many people reached a similar understanding without his help. Guillaume Apollinaire was not waiting for *Fountain* when he wrote, in *The Cubist Painters* in 1913: “You may paint with whatever material you please, with pipes, postage stamps, postcards or playing cards, candelabra, pieces of oil cloth, collars, painted paper, newspapers.”⁹ Although William Carlos Williams was a member of the Arensberg circle and, as such, knew Duchamp by 1916, Duchamp did not whisper the following into his ear: “I’ll write whatever I damn please, whenever I damn please and as I damn please and it’ll be good if the authentic spirit of change is on it.”¹⁰ And to take an example from the ’70s, when nobody in avant-garde circles, least of all the Situationists, would have dared admit ignorance of Duchamp, I’m sure it was Guy Debord’s pride, not Duchamp’s “influence,” that led him to pronounce: “Yes, I flatter myself to make a film from anything whatsoever, and I find amusing the complaints of those who let their whole life become whatever.”¹¹

Add to these few examples Robert Frank’s alleged statement that today one is free to

photograph anything, and the one difference between these various realizations that anything can be art and the acknowledgment of receipt of Duchamp's message will leap to the eye. Apollinaire speaks of painting, Williams of literature, Debord of film, and Frank of photography. They allow infinite expansion of artistic means—but within the confines of a given medium. Compare their declarations with this one, by Allan Kaprow: “Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists.”¹² There is no mention of any medium, only of art in general. The interesting thing is that Kaprow makes this generalization a legacy of Jackson Pollock. This shows that one can consider oneself heir to a painter while echoing news received from a very different messenger.

TO ACKNOWLEDGE RECEIPT of Duchamp's message is to engage in—I'm tempted to write “to succumb to”—a compelling, quasi-automatic reasoning process that cannot fail to draw the most general conclusions from the utterly contingent premises it was given. I call this the “Duchamp syllogism,” and I take it to be the logical driving force behind the so-called Duchamp effect: When a urinal is art, anything can be art; and when anything can be art, anybody can be an artist. There are countless signs indicating that the reception of Duchamp's message in the '60s proceeded along the lines of that syllogism more often than not, including—and these might be the most interesting—signs of *resistance* to the message's content.

Here are two such signs of resistance. Probably with the enthusiasm of the likes of Kaprow in mind, Robert Smithson scornfully wrote:

*Many so-called artists see 'art' everywhere, in this world. . . . This orgy of aesthetics, such as textures on the sidewalks, interesting shapes on the mailboxes, and gods in the machines must be prevented, or else the artist will die in his own art.*¹³

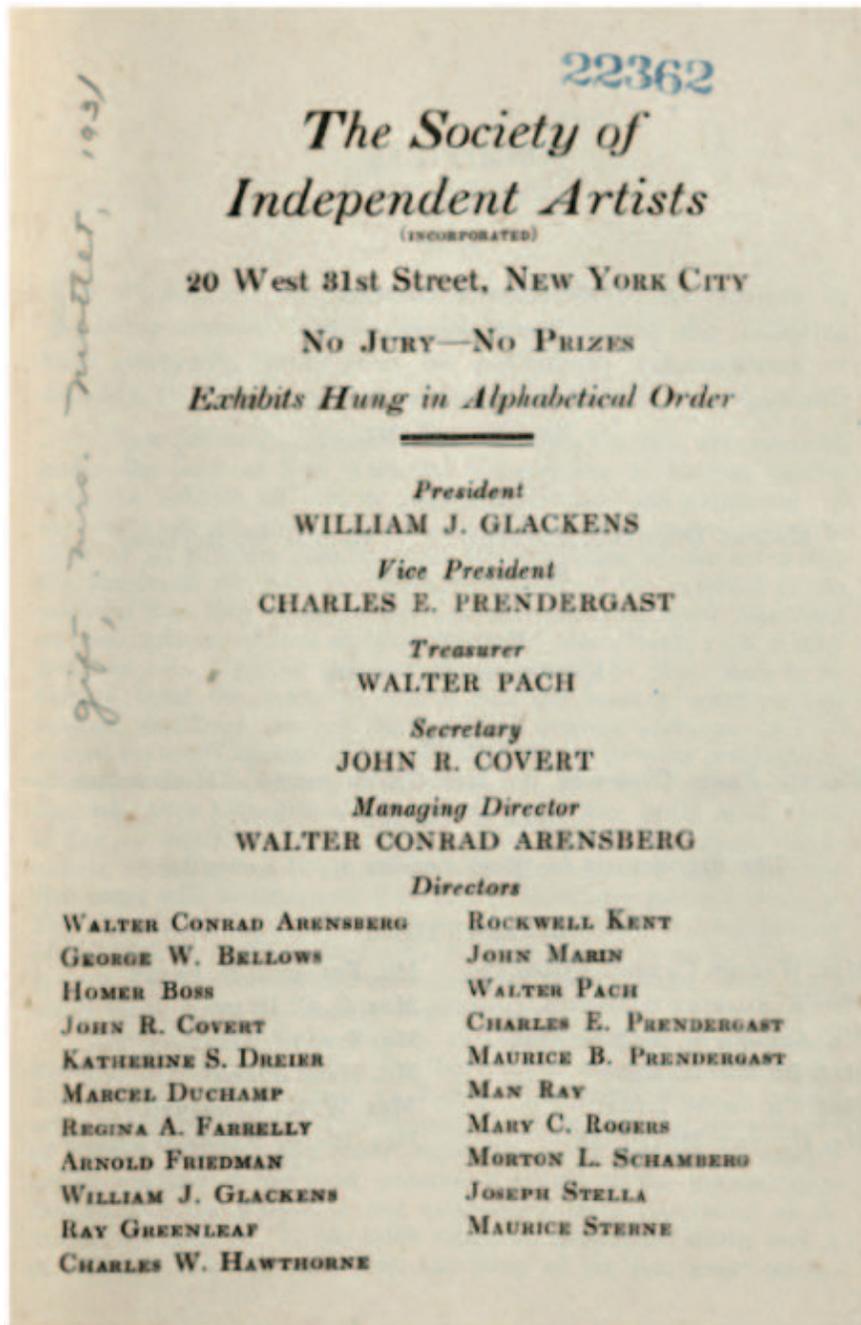
This predates by ten years Smithson's interview with Moira Roth, in which he expresses his dislike for Duchamp's dandyism and his lassitude with the “Duchampitis” he sees as having seized the art world.¹⁴ There is no artistic personality more opposed to Smithson's than that of Joseph Beuys. Yet Beuys's acknowledgment of receipt of Duchamp's message was a sign of resistance, too. Commenting in retrospect on his 1964 televised performance, “*Das Schweigen von Marcel Duchamp wird überbewertet*” (Marcel Duchamp's Silence Is Overrated), he made the following declarations:

*I criticize him [Duchamp] because at the very moment when he could have developed a theory on the basis of the work he had accomplished, he kept silent. And I am the one who, today, develops the theory he could have developed.*¹⁵

*He entered this object [the urinal] into the museum and noticed that its transportation from one place to another made it into art. But he failed to draw the clear and simple conclusion that every human being is an artist.*¹⁶

An artist may be pardoned for his misinterpretation of another artist's work. Yet the fact remains that Beuys made two mistakes in the above statements. The second one has huge

consequences for the proper understanding of Duchamp's message, and I'll address it in due time. But the first one, which is factual, has its importance too. Duchamp did not enter *Fountain* into the museum. No doubt he made sure that it would, in the end, be enshrined as a museum piece, but he astutely managed to make his moves appear as gracious responses to someone else's desire.



Page from the *Catalogue of the First Annual Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists* (William Edwin Rudge, 1917).

The original 1917 *Fountain* is lost; nobody knows what really happened to it. All examples of *Fountain* presently in museums are replicas and, with two exceptions, were commissioned by the Milanese art dealer Arturo Schwarz. (In 1964, less than a year after

Duchamp's Pasadena Art Museum retrospective, Schwarz convinced the artist to have fourteen of his readymades and related works minutely reconstructed in an edition of eight, plus two artist's proofs.¹⁷) The two exceptions are the Sidney Janis and the Ulf Linde versions. In 1950, invited by Janis to participate in the dealer's "Challenge and Defy" group show, Duchamp managed to have him find a suitable replacement for *Fountain*. Janis located a urinal of a similar model in a Paris flea market.¹⁸ He exhibited it twice in his gallery: in the "Challenge and Defy" show, hung on the wall in its usual orientation, and rather low, so that "little boys could use it,"¹⁹ and then again in the "Dada 1916–1923" show of 1953, where it hung above a door opening, upside down, with a sprig of mistletoe hanging from it. The Janis replica was subsequently displayed in William Seitz's 1961 Museum of Modern Art exhibition "The Art of Assemblage," then in Duchamp's 1963 Pasadena retrospective; it eventually found its way into the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where it complements the Arensberg collection of the artist's work. In Pasadena, it was displayed in a peculiar arrangement: above it hovered *Pliant de voyage* (Traveler's Folding Item), an oilcloth dustcover for an Underwood typewriter, dated 1916; and above the typewriter cover, there hung a small glass vial Duchamp had bought in a Paris pharmacy in 1919, emptied of the serum it contained, and filled with ambient air, titled *Air de Paris*.²⁰ This arrangement, with the urinal underneath, the typewriter cover in the middle, and the vial high above, echoed an identical arrangement at the Galerie Burén in Stockholm a few months earlier, in April and May of 1963. There, the art critic Ulf Linde provided the urinal and the typewriter cover.²¹ The story is that he found an adequate urinal in the men's room of his favorite restaurant and traded the owner a new one for it.²²

Now, why did the curators of the Stockholm and the Pasadena shows, Linde and Walter Hopps, respectively, choose to display the urinal, the typewriter cover, and the vial in that particular arrangement? The answer forces us to reach further into the past, to the *Boîte-en-valise*. In 1935, Duchamp began to work on "an album of approximately all the things [he] produced."²³ Six years later, when the first *Boîtes* appeared, the announced "album" turned out to be a rectangular box, approximately sixteen by sixteen by four inches, containing sixty-nine items minutely reproducing almost all of Duchamp's works. The deluxe edition was packed in a leather suitcase, hence the appellation *Boîte-en-valise*. Most works were replicated with elaborate means involving collotype printing and pochoir coloring. A system of flaps and sliding pullouts allowed the display of several facsimiles of paintings and works on glass. When opened and unfolded, the central part showed a celluloid reproduction of the *Large Glass* and, on its left, three miniature replicas of readymades: the urinal below, the typewriter cover at the height of the "horizon line" that separates the "bachelors' domain" in the lower part of the *Glass* from the "bride's domain" in the upper part, and the vial full of Paris air in the upper area next to the bride. This is the arrangement the Stockholm and Pasadena shows reproduce.²⁴ Clearly, Linde and Hopps went out of their way to legitimate the readymades through their esoteric ties to the *Large Glass*, and explicitly referred the spectator to the *Boîte-en-valise*, where some information, however cryptic, could be gathered regarding the origin and history of *Fountain*, *Pliant de voyage*, and *Air de Paris*. Labels were affixed to the cardboard wall of the compartment that housed the miniature replicas of the three readymades. The one next to the mini-urinal stated:

Fountain by Richard MUTT (Ready made; haut. 0^m60) New-York, 1917

That label is the first written statement on the part of Duchamp that links him directly to “Richard Mutt” while acknowledging Mutt as the author of *Fountain*. It also mentions, for the first time, the place and date of the work. Of course the date, 1917, and the signature, R. MUTT, were readable on both Linde’s and Janis’s replicas, just as they can be read in Alfred Stieglitz’s famous photograph, which is virtually the only proof that such a signed and dated urinal once existed. As for proof that the photograph was actually taken in 1917, there is practically none other than its appearance in the second issue, from May 1917, of *The Blind Man*, the little magazine that Duchamp, his friend Henri-Pierre Roché, and their mutual (girl-)friend Beatrice Wood published. Very few people would have laid eyes on that issue, as the circulation of the magazine did not exceed a few hundred hand-distributed copies. To see Stieglitz’s photo of *Fountain* reappear in print, one had to await the publication of a 1945 issue of *View* magazine entirely devoted to Duchamp. It included an article by Harriet and Sidney Janis, “Marcel Duchamp: Anti-Artist,” which Robert Motherwell reprinted in his 1951 anthology *The Dada Painters and Poets*. Incidentally, Motherwell may have been the first person to have formally acknowledged receipt of Duchamp’s message, when he wrote in his entry on the bottle rack: “It is also a subtle solution to an essential dada dilemma, how to express oneself without art *when all means of expression are potentially artistic*.”²⁵ Motherwell’s anthology was a success but could not compete with the popular press. Only when Winthrop Sargeant’s article in *Life* magazine was published in April 1952 did Duchamp’s career with the broad public take off, and only then was *Fountain* launched into orbit, eventually becoming the famous icon we now know.

(Image omitted; see it at

<http://artforum.com/img.php?url=%2Fuploads%2Fupload.001%2Fid10766%2Farticle03.jpg&width=459&height=700&caption=%3Cb%3EPage+from+the+%3Ci%3ECatalogue+of+the+First+Annual+Exhibition+of+the+Society+of+Independent+Artists%3C%2Fi%3E%3C%2Fb%3E+%28William+Edwin+Rudge%2C+1917%29>)

Page from the *Catalogue of the First Annual Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists* (William Edwin Rudge, 1917).

The only *Fountain* replica to have entered a museum in Duchamp’s lifetime is the Linde version, which was donated to Stockholm’s Moderna Museet in 1965. The first Schwarz replica of *Fountain* to land in a museum was bought by Brydon Smith for the National Gallery of Canada in 1971; the Centre Pompidou in Paris and Tate Modern in London acquired their replicas only in 1986 and 1999, respectively. Schwarz sold one to the National Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto in 1987 and donated one to the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome in 1997. And the Janis version entered the Philadelphia Museum of Art only in 1998.

THOSE ARE THE FACTS Beuys ignored or deemed unimportant when he claimed that Duchamp entered a urinal into the museum.²⁶ Facts are boring, I know. But they constitute the forensic evidence with which serious art history must reckon. We are fortunate to rely on the remarkable detective work done by William Camfield, Francis

Naumann, and others as to the fate of *Fountain*, so that the facts are by now fairly well known.²⁷ I shall focus only on the ones that are relevant to my inquiry.

All readers of *Artforum* know that in 1917, Duchamp, hiding behind the pseudonym R. Mutt, sought to enter a urinal titled *Fountain* into an exhibition and that it was rejected, or rather, censored.²⁸ There is no doubt about the censorship, since the exhibition in question was advertised as one “where artists of all schools can exhibit together—certain that *whatever* [emphasis mine] they send will be hung and that all will have an equal opportunity.”²⁹ Fewer people, however, know that no scandal at all broke out during the exhibition. In support of R. Mutt, Duchamp resigned from his chairmanship of the hanging committee, and a few newspapers picked up the news, but then only to mention a “bathroom fixture” or “a familiar article of bathroom furniture” without ever identifying it as a men’s urinal and, of course, without unmasking Mr. Mutt.³⁰ The second issue of *The Blind Man*, in which Stieglitz’s photo revealed just what kind of bathroom fixture *Fountain* actually was, appeared as the exhibition ended and nowhere cites Duchamp’s name.

As we have seen, Duchamp hid his authorship of *Fountain* until he released the *Boîtes-en-valise* in the early ’40s. Those are important facts. What is not a fact is my contention that the purpose of *The Blind Man*’s photo and editorial had never been to cause a scandal but rather to put *Fountain* on the record for future art history. This is what I mean when I say that Duchamp put a message in the mail. He lived long enough to see it delivered. Whether he had foreseen the ripples its delivery would make or was genuinely surprised remains a mystery none of his late, carefully rehearsed interviews—or his deadpan appearance in one of Warhol’s 1966 Screen Tests—has laid to rest.

The most relevant fact of the R. Mutt affair for my purpose is the institutional context in which *Fountain* appeared and then immediately disappeared. I have spoken thus far of an exhibition without being more specific. I am actually referring to the first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, Inc., which opened on April 10, 1917, at the Grand Central Palace in New York. The initial announcement released by the society stated:

*There are no requirements for admission to the Society save the acceptance of its principles and the payment of the initiation fee of one dollar and the annual dues of five dollars. All exhibitors are thus members and all have a vote for the directors and on the decisions made by the Society at its annual meetings.*³¹

As for the principles to which this announcement refers, they boiled down to the slogan “No jury, no prizes,” which was not cast in the society’s bylaws but was commented on at length in the foreword to the catalogue of its first exhibition. Membership in the society was thus absolutely unrestricted, something the press didn’t fail to notice. One journalist offered this ironic comment:

*Step up, ladies and gentlemen! Pay six dollars and be an artist—an independent artist! . . . Cheap isn’t it? Yet that is all it costs. You and I, even if we’ve never wielded a brush, squeezed paint from a tube, spoiled good paper with crayon, or worked with a modelling tool, can buy six dollars worth of wall or floor space at the Grand Central Palace.*³²

Beuys's second mistake now jumps to the fore. After (wrongly) crediting Duchamp for having entered a urinal into the museum and having "noticed that its transportation from one place to another made it into art," Beuys reads Duchamp's message in reverse when he adds: "But he failed to draw the clear and simple conclusion that every human being is an artist." Because Beuys's reading was uttered not by an artist under Duchamp's spell but, on the contrary, by one who thought his silence was overrated, it is about as exemplary a formulation of the Duchamp syllogism as you can get: When a urinal enters the museum it becomes art; when a urinal is art, anything is a plausible candidate for the name *art*; when anything and everything can be art, everybody is potentially an artist.

But clearly, the *truth* of Duchamp's message goes the other way around: When anybody is institutionally allowed to be an artist, it is about time to show that anything can be art, even a urinal, and to bet that it will land in the museum someday. Beuys was a powerful utopian thinker who entertained a romantic belief in universal creativity and wanted art to change the world. Duchamp was a cynic in Diogenes's sense, the revealer of an unwanted truth. Or of a truth too eagerly desired? Unwanted by the Ashcan School alumni who formed the bulk of the Independents' founders; desired by the baby boomers of the '60s, who sought liberation from all constraints in art and life alike. I think the pervasive utopianism of the '60s explains why so many people misread Duchamp's message to the point of inverting its logic altogether. Beuys was far from alone in his reversed and somewhat disingenuous reading. It is hard to decide whether Jack Burnham was disingenuous or truly naive when he wrote: "Obviously it is no longer important who is or is not a good artist; the only sensible question is—as is already grasped by some young people—why isn't everybody an artist?"³³

Why indeed? Robert Filliou—whose "principle of equivalence" between "well made," "badly made," and "not made" (leaving out the fourth possibility, "ready made") represents one of the wittiest acknowledgments of receipt of Duchamp's message—was definitely enthusiastic, even though humor saves him from being a true believer: "*Oui, oui, voilà, oui! Tout le monde sera un artiste*" (Yes, yes, you see, yes! Everybody will be an artist in the future). As if taking their cue from Ben's 1962 realization that "since Duchamp one is allowed to put anything into this [art] box," a number of major players in the art world of the '60s seem to have inferred that everybody was—could be, should be, would be—an artist. From the vantage point of our "contemporaneity," where it is all too blatantly clear that not everybody has become an artist, not much remains of Filliou's enthusiasm, save sepia-tinted nostalgia for the '60s. It is time to move on, time to conceive of criticality in nonutopian terms, time to stop mistaking an angel for a prophet (*angelos* means "messenger"). And it is time to rewrite the art-historical narrative—respecting, not inverting, the logic of the facts.

THE SOCIETY OF INDEPENDENT ARTISTS was incorporated in New York on December 5, 1916, after a few months of discussion, gathering some twenty artists and at least one art patron, the collector Walter Arensberg. William Glackens was named president and almost everybody else a "director." The core of the group—Glackens, Rockwell Kent, George Bellows, Maurice Prendergast, and his brother Charles—had been associated with the Eight, aka the Ashcan School. The most advanced American artists in the group were John Covert, Morton Schamberg, Man Ray, Joseph Stella, and

John Marin. Duchamp was solicited early on, and he was not the only Frenchman to be involved. Among the European expats who had fled the war and taken refuge in New York were Francis Picabia, Jean Crotti, and Albert Gleizes. All three participated in the discussions. Did they have a hand in the following, lifted from the foreword to the catalogue of the society's first exhibition?

The program of the Society of Independent Artists, which is practically self-explanatory, has been taken over from the Société des Artistes Indépendants of Paris. The latter Society, whose salon is the oldest in France, has done more for the advance of French art than any other institution of its period. A considerable number of the most prominent artists of the present generation and the preceding one established their reputation at its annual exhibitions. It has more members, sells more works and is on a firmer financial basis than any other of the four great salons. The reason for this success is to be found in the principle adopted at its founding in 1884 and never changed: "No jury, no prizes."³⁴

In the French of the original Société: *Ni jury ni récompense*. It is unclear who proposed the name "Independents" and who suggested modeling the society's bylaws on those of the French Société des Artistes Indépendants. The most likely candidates are Duchamp and Gleizes, for obvious reasons: They were both French and both had experience with the Paris Indépendants. But—and the cruel irony of the whole R. Mutt affair might very well hinge on this—at the 1912 Salon des Indépendants, they had found themselves on opposite sides. Gleizes and his fellow Cubist Jean Metzinger had just published a very dogmatic treatise/manifesto titled *Du Cubisme* and, together with Henri Le Fauconnier and Duchamp's brothers, Jacques Villon and Raymond Duchamp-Villon, they formed the hanging committee of the Cubist room. In compliance with the motto *Ni jury ni récompense*, the committee was supposed to confine itself to installation decisions. Yet when the young Duchamp arrived with a new painting titled *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)*, Gleizes and Metzinger asked him to remove his painting from the show. Duchamp's brothers tried a mediation by asking him to change the title, but the guardians of orthodox Cubism prevailed and Duchamp withdrew the painting, mortified—so mortified that shortly thereafter he left Puteaux, where he had been living near his brothers, and a few months later took exile in Munich, where he would remain until the fall. He would never forget and never forgive, even though the *Nude* was rehabilitated at the Salon de la Section d'Or in October 1912 and enjoyed a tremendous succès de scandale at the Armory Show in February 1913.

Here we must leave facts behind and enter the realm of speculation.³⁵ I can think of two scenarios. Either Duchamp brought up the Paris Indépendants in the founders' meetings as a possible model for their new society, and gave them the arguments listed in the foreword to the catalogue; or Gleizes did, with Duchamp watching from the sidelines. I like the latter scenario even better than the first. Please reread the excerpt I quoted and notice its bombastic rhetoric, its accumulation of superlatives, its rampant nationalism, and its appeal to crass commercialism. Only a dead-serious ideologue or a supreme ironist could have crafted such a piece of prose. Either way, it is the supreme ironist who saw to it that it got printed—or so I am convinced. The presence of his nemesis at the discussion may have spurred Duchamp's *talionism* (his word for revenge promoted to the rank of artistic "ism"), and too bad if it was taken at the expense of the innocent and

unsuspecting American art community. Gleizes would soon be the true target of *Fountain*, and with Gleizes, the academization of the Paris Indépendants.

Facts have the last word in art history. No matter which of my two scenarios—or a third one—proves to be right, the fact remains that the R. Mutt affair took place in a precise institutional context with a precise transatlantic history. As Camfield has noted:

*To a considerable extent the Society was a direct descendant of such organizations as The Eight, the 1910 Independents Group, and the Armory Show—all formed to provide exhibitions of American art outside the structure of the National Academy of Design and offerings of conventional art galleries. From the outset, however, the Society of Independent Artists was distinguished by a contingent of French artists and the intent to be an ongoing organization modeled after the French Société des Artistes Indépendants.*³⁶

The key word in the transatlantic bridge Camfield rightly establishes between Paris and New York is *independence*, and the key words in the trans-atlantic abyss that nevertheless subsists are *ongoing organization*. Reviewing the 1910 exhibition, Robert Henri wrote:

*This is called an independent exhibition because it is a manifestation of independence in art and of the absolute necessity of such independence. It does not mean that it is an independent organization, but that it is made up of the independent points of view of men who are investigating.*³⁷

For Henri, independence was synonymous with individuality. The American founding members of the 1916 Society of Independent Artists probably understood it similarly. But by modeling their newly incorporated society after the French Indépendants and intending it to be “an ongoing organization,” they unwittingly imported an institutional model foreign to their tradition.

The transplant did not take. The Society of Independent Artists contributed nothing to the history of avant-garde art in the US. Its only memorable salon is the first one, and then only on account of the one item that was not exhibited! But the fact that the R. Mutt affair took place in that particular institutional context is very much part of the message Duchamp put in the mail in 1917 with *Fountain*. On the face of it, the message stated: Anything and everything can now be art. “Now” refers to 1917, not 1964, the year of Schwarz’s replicas, Beuys’s *The Silence of Marcel Duchamp Is Overrated*, Warhol’s Brillo Boxes, and other acknowledgments of receipt of the message. On the whole, the art world of the ’60s succumbed to the Duchamp syllogism and mistook a condition for a consequence. They read, “If B, then A,” where the messenger had written, “If A, then B.” Our inquiry allows us to rephrase the message, putting what comes first first: Anyone and everyone can now be an artist; consequently, anything and everything can now be art. Does “now” still refer to 1917? If we focus on the consequence, yes. But if we focus on the condition, “now” actually refers to 1884, the year the Société des Artistes Indépendants was founded in Paris by a circle of artists around Georges Seurat and Paul Signac. “Anything can be art,” the first layer of meaning in Duchamp’s message, is a red herring. “Anyone can be an artist,” the second layer, gets us closer to the core of the

matter. But there are more layers waiting to be peeled away, and to get to the next one, we might as well ask the question several critics posed at the 1884 Salon des Indépendants: Why did those artists call themselves *Indépendants*? Independent of whom, of what?

Next, in the January 2014 issue of *Artforum*: “Part III: Why Was Modernism Born in France?”

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Visit *Artforum*'s archive at Artforum.com for the first installment of de Duve's ongoing series: “Part I: Pardon My French,” from the October 2013 issue.

NOTES

1. *October* 70 (Fall 1994), reprinted as *The Duchamp Effect* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
2. Okwui Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 211. A slightly different version was first published in *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 61.
3. See *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 79.
4. With the notorious exception of the readymade's definition in André Breton and Paul Éluard's *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* (Paris: Galerie des Beaux-Arts, 1938), 23: “*Objet usuel promu à la dignité d'objet d'art par le simple choix de l'artiste*” (Ordinary object promoted to the dignity of art object simply by the artist's choice). The entry is signed m.d. It is possible that Duchamp thought so in 1938, though I think it more plausible that he was feigning to placate Breton, whose entry on him called him “the most intelligent and (for many) the most embarrassing man of this first part of the 20th century”(ibid., 10). I find it in any case significant that Duchamp ironically concluded his entry on the readymade with promotion to the dignity of art *in reverse*: “*Ready made réciproque: se servir d'un Rembrandt comme planche à repasser*” (Reciprocal ready made: use a Rembrandt as an ironing board).
5. See my “Authorship Stripped Bare, Even,” *Res* 19/20 (1990/91): 234–41.
6. I take issue with the notion of the “post-medium” condition, but this is not the place to do it. See Rosalind Krauss, “. . . And Then Turn Away? An Essay on James Coleman,” *October* 81 (Summer 1997): 5–33; Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999); Krauss “*A Voyage on the North Sea*”: *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999); Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

7. It won't be before we reach the last of this series of articles.
8. The story of Warhol and John Giorno meeting Duchamp that I told in article 1 is exemplary in this respect. See my "Pardon My French," *Artforum*, October 2013, 246–53.
9. Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters: Aesthetic Meditations* (New York: Wittenborn, 1962), 23. A note in the French edition specifies that "painted paper [i.e., wallpaper], newspapers" was an addition on the galleys, proof that Apollinaire had only recently heard of *papiers collés*.
10. William Carlos Williams, *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (Boston: The Four Seas Company, 1920), 16.
11. "Oui, je me flatte de faire un film de n'importe quoi, et je trouve plaisant que s'en plaignent ceux qui ont laissé faire de toute leur vie n'importe quoi." Voice-over in Guy Debord's last film, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978).
12. Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" (1958), in Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 7–9.
13. Robert Smithson, letter to George Lester (1961), quoted in Thomas Crow, "Cosmic Exile: Prophetic Turns in the Life and Art of Robert Smithson," in *Robert Smithson*, ed. Eugenie Tsai and Cornelia Butler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 37.
14. See "Robert Smithson on Duchamp, An Interview with Moira Roth," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 197–99.
15. Joseph Beuys (quoted in French), "Interview with Bernard Lamarche-Vadel," *Canal* 58/59 (Winter 1984/85): 7.
16. Beuys (quoted in French), "Interview with Irmeline Lebeer," *Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* 4 (1980): 176.
17. Schwarz, who would later become Duchamp's biographer, has said that in addition to the artist's proofs, two "exhibition copies" were also made.
18. See William Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp: Fountain* (Houston: Houston Fine Art Press, 1989), 77–78.
19. Sidney Janis, in a letter to Camfield dated August 18, 1987, cited in *ibid.*, 78.
20. Actually, this was a replica, too. Walter Arensberg, the owner of the original, had accidentally broken it. A letter to Henri-Pierre Roché, dated May 9, 1949, attests that Duchamp asked his friend to secure a similar vial from the pharmacy where he had bought the original. See Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp*, 76–77.

21. More remarkably, without having seen the original, Linde also made the copy of the *Large Glass* that was shown at the Galerie Burén and then traveled to Pasadena.
22. Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp*, 91.
23. Marcel Duchamp, in a letter to Katherine Dreier dated March 5, 1935, quoted in Ecke Bonk, *Marcel Duchamp: The Box in a Valise* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 147. I rely on Bonk's book for the description of the *Boîte-en-valise* that follows.
24. With one difference, however: Contrary to Janis in 1950, Linde and Hopps did not hang the urinal in its usual, functional position, as Duchamp hung his miniature replica in the *Boîte-en-valise*. They took their cue from the Stieglitz photograph as well as from the readability of the inscription.
25. See Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets* (New York: Wittenborn, 1951), 306–15; and xvii (emphasis mine). Camfield insists that “that issue of *View* did not reach a wide audience,” but that Motherwell's anthology “had incalculable influence on our thinking about Duchamp and a revived interest in Dada.” Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp*, 76.
26. Of course, Beuys could not have known the facts posterior to January 23, 1986, the date of his death.
27. Besides Camfield's groundbreaking work, let me signal Francis Naumann, “The Big Show: The First Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, Part I,” *Artforum*, February 1979, 34–39, and “Part II: The Critical Response,” *Artforum*, April 1979, 49–53; see also Edward Ball and Robert Knafo, “The R. Mutt Dossier,” *Artforum*, October 1988, 116–19.
28. “There was not time enough to assemble the entire board of directors, but a group of about ten was gathered to decide the issue, and according to a *New York Herald* reporter, a battle raged up to the opening hour of the exhibition on April 9, at which time ‘Mr. Mutt's defenders were voted down by a small margin.’” Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp*, 26. This, and the version told by Rockwell Kent in his autobiography (in my opinion the most probable one), in which he writes that after a heated discussion the board of directors finally found a way to refuse *Fountain* on the basis of a technicality (the entry card had not been filled in properly), are the least farfetched of the many stories telling the fate of *Fountain*. See Rockwell Kent, *It's Me, O Lord* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1955), 316.
29. Announcement titled “The Society of Independent Artists, Inc.,” undated, in the Archives of the Société Anonyme, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; quoted in Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp*, 19.
30. In addition to Camfield's book, see my “Given the Richard Mutt Case,” *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
31. “The Society of Independent Artists, Inc.” 32. Naumann, “The Big Show,” 49.

33. Jack Burnham, "Problems of Criticism IX," *Artforum*, January 1971, reprinted in *Idea Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1973), 69.

34. Quoted in C. S. Marlor, *The Society of Independent Artists* (Park Ridge, NJ: Noyes Press, 1984), 7. The same excerpt is also cited by H. P. Roché in the first issue of the *Blind Man* (p. 4), and taken up by at least one reviewer of the show (*Springfield Republican*, April 15, 1917).

35. Not that there are no facts, but they have been erased. Nothing has transpired from the meetings that led to the incorporation of the society (nor from the meeting where *Fountain's* lot was decided), because a fire destroyed almost all the archives of the society in the '30s. See Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp*, 28.

36. *Ibid.*, 14.

37. Robert Henri, "The New York Exhibition of Independent Artists," *Craftsman* 17, no. 2 (May 1910): 160–61.