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RETROACTIVE READYMADES *

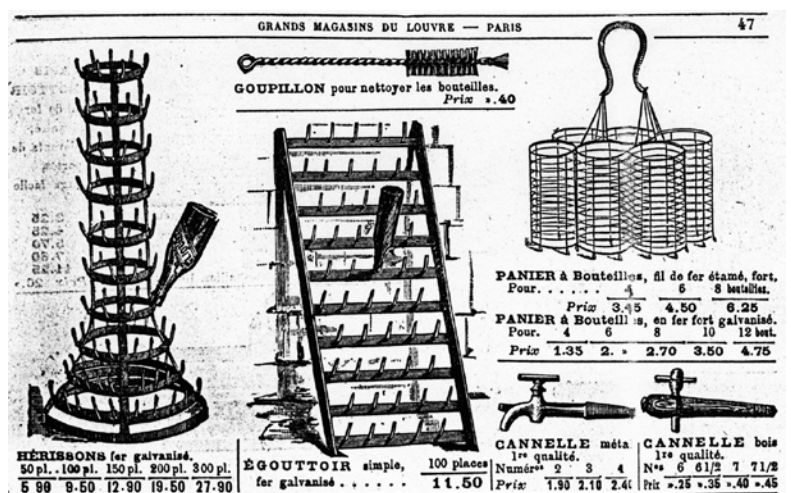
In 1960, Robert Rauschenberg—recently acknowledged inventor of combine painting—asked Marcel Duchamp—venerated inventor of the ready-made—to sign a bottle rack he had acquired about a year earlier (12.1), thereby transforming this manufactured, everyday artifact into a work of art.¹ Duchamp willingly complied, but after his signature, added the following inscription: *Impossible de me rappeler la phrase originale* [Impossible for me to recall the original phrase], indicating that he forgot what he had written on the original *Bottle Rack*, which had been lost or discarded shortly after it was made in 1914. It would, of course, seem natural to forget the specific wording of a phrase one had inscribed on an artifact some forty-five years earlier. A careful analysis of certain critical documents from the period, however, will reveal that the reason Duchamp could not recall the phrase was because he never wrote it.

When Duchamp left Paris for New York in 1915, he left behind two artifacts in his rue Saint-Hippolyte studio: a bicycle wheel mounted on a stool, and a bottle rack, a circular, multi-tiered metal stand with prongs on which to place inverted bottles to dry, a commonplace object found in most French homes, which Duchamp purchased in 1914 from the Grand Bazar de l'Hôtel-de-ville, one of the largest Parisian department stores. Both of these artifacts disappeared, and whereas it is difficult to reconstruct the precise appearance of the original *Bicycle Wheel* (see Chapter 6), the design of the bottle rack is easy to imagine, since the same utensil is still sold in French department stores today. As with many other readymades, we have the option of looking at subsequent replicas (like the one made for Rauschenberg), or if we desire historical accuracy, we can exhume old department-store catalogues in which objects of a similar design are illustrated, such as one from the Grands Magasins du Louvre from 1913 (12.2).

What, exactly—it seems reasonable to ask—did Duchamp have in mind when he brought these quotidian artifacts into his studio? If his own explanations are accurate (and we have no reason to doubt them), he did not at first think of them as finished works of art. “It was just a distraction,” he later said of the bicycle wheel. “I didn’t have any special reason to do it, or any intention of showing it, or describing anything.”² He claimed that the reason for its fabrication was very simple: “To see that wheel turning was very soothing, very comforting... I enjoyed looking at it, just as I enjoy looking at the flames dancing in a fireplace.”³ When asked to provide a motive for his invention of the readymades, Duchamp explained that it was in order to disassociate himself physically from the creative

12.1 *Bottle Rack*, 1914/60
Estate of Robert Rauschenberg

12.2 Bottle racks, bottle brush, and wine taps from the catalogue *Grands Magasins du Louvre*, Paris, 1913
Collection Ronny van de Velde, Antwerp, Belgium



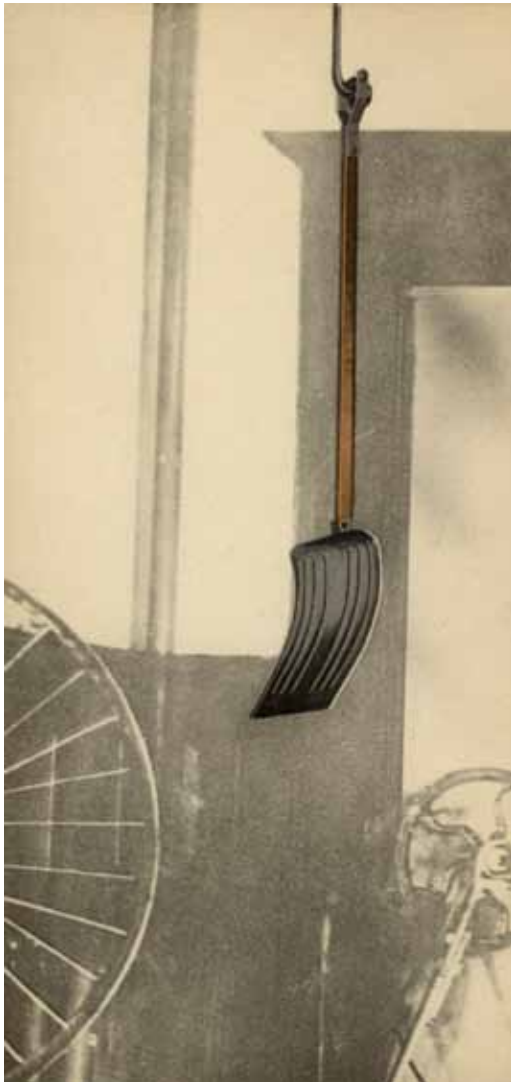
* An earlier version of this essay was presented as a lecture entitled “Marcel Duchamp: Genius Readymade,” College of Santa Fe, Santa Fe, New Mexico, December 3, 1996. It was published as “Retroactive Readymades” in *Aftershock: The Legacy of the Readymade in Post-War and Contemporary American Art*, a show organized by Henry Allsopp for the Dickinson Gallery, New York, May 5 – June 20, 2003, pp. 8–17, 120.

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process: “To cut my hands off,” as he put it. “In other words,” he further explained, “I reduce the idea of aesthetic consideration to the choice of the mind, not to the ability or cleverness of the hand.” Finally, the “functionalism” of a readymade, he insisted, “was already obliterated by the fact that I took it out of the earth and onto the planet of aesthetics.”⁴

It was at some point in 1913—around the time when he made his bicycle wheel assembly—that Duchamp asked himself one of the most momentous questions ever asked by any artist in the twentieth century: *Peut-on faire des oeuvres qui ne soient pas “d’art”?* [Can one make works which are not works of “art?”]. He scrawled this question down on a sheet of paper, and wrote on the verso: 1913 (4.10).⁵ Since both the bicycle wheel and this note are dated 1913, and since Duchamp is no longer available to clarify the order in which they were made, we face a situation resembling the age-old conundrum of creation: “Which came first: the chicken or the egg?” or, in this case, “the object or the idea?” There is some evidence that Duchamp asked himself this question *after* he had created the bicycle-wheel assembly, for, as he explained, it was visually appealing, something he enjoyed looking at. It was probably while admiring its aesthetic qualities that he wondered, to paraphrase his words, if one could make a work of art out of materials that were not customarily associated with art.

12.3 *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1915
Photograph taken in 1920 and reproduced in Marcel Duchamp, *La Boîte-en-valise*, 1936-41



No matter which came first—the object or the idea—two years passed before Duchamp would resolve this issue, not only for himself, but also for the subsequent history of 20th-century art. In June 1915, he left France for America, where, because of the scandal caused by his *Nude Descending a Staircase* (2.1) at the Armory Show two years earlier, he was greeted as a near-celebrity. In interviews with the press he repeatedly emphasized the pleasure he experienced in all aspects of modern city life. The one thing he did not like about America was the reverential attitude it harbored toward European art. “If only America would realize that the art of Europe is finished—dead,” he pronounced. “America is the country of the art of the future.”⁶ Of course, at the time when he made this statement, Duchamp could not have known the degree to which his own artistic future would affect the course of American art, which—in the second decade of the 20th century—he did more to change than did any other artist of his generation.

In November 1915, two months after his arrival in New York, Duchamp walked into a hardware store on Columbus Avenue and purchased an ordinary snow shovel, an object quite common in the city’s winter climate, but then strikingly unfamiliar to the average Frenchman (nearly as unusual in appearance to him as a bottle rack would be for the average American). Back in his studio, he inscribed the shovel with the phrase *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, signed it [*d’après*] Marcel Duchamp, and probably hung the object from a hook (as it appears in a photograph taken in another studio five years later: 12.3). It was precisely at this time that Duchamp came up with the English word “readymade,” a term used to describe clothing that was already made (as opposed to custom made, or tailor made). Shortly thereafter, he made a replica of his bicycle wheel and stool assembly, a work that has since disappeared, but which was likewise recorded in a photograph of his studio taken a few years later (18.2).

In mid-January 1916, Duchamp wrote a letter to his sister Suzanne (21.1), telling her all about readymades and how he intended—retroactively—to include in this same category of objects the two works he had left behind in his studio. “You know English well enough,” he told her, “to understand the sense of ‘ready made’ that I give these objects. I sign them and give them an English inscription.” He then went on to give her several examples, telling her not to try to understand his inscriptions “in the Romantic or Impressionist

or Cubist sense.” “That,” he said, “does not have any connection with it.” He then told her why he bothered to provide this detailed explanation to begin with, which—because it is so important to understanding Duchamp’s original concept of the readymade—we cite here in full (both in the original French and English translation):

Tout ce préambule pour te dire:

Prends pour toi ce porte bouteilles. J’en fais un “Ready-made” à distance. Tu inscriras en bas et à l’intérieur du cercle du bas en petites lettres peintes avec un pinceau à l’huile en couleur blanc d’argent l’inscription que je vais te donner ci après et tu signeras de la même écriture comme suit:

[d’après] Marcel Duchamp.

This whole preamble in order to say to you:

Take for yourself this bottle rack. I will make it into a “Readymade” from a distance. You will have to write at the base and on the inside of the bottom ring in small letters painted with an oil-painting brush, in silver-white color, the inscription that I will give you after this, and you will sign it in the same hand as follows:

[after] Marcel Duchamp⁷

When I first published this letter some twenty years ago, I did not quite understand what Duchamp was instructing his sister to do. When he said she would have to write the inscription *que je vais te donner ci après* [that I will give you after this], I was under the impression that “this” was a pronoun referring to the words he was writing and, by extension, the paragraph, or even the page he was writing on. Read this way, it would mean that some sort of an inscription was to follow, something perhaps written on a separate piece of paper: a third—though by then missing—page of the letter. I had further speculated that in order to complete her brother’s instructions, Suzanne might have carried this page off to the studio, whereupon the separate fragment containing Duchamp’s inscription was subsequently lost.

Logical though this reasoning may have been, I now believe it was in error. My original reading of the letter required more speculation than was necessary to understand Duchamp’s intentions. What he actually meant—and, in fact, wrote—is that *she* (not him, but his sister Suzanne) was supposed to compose a *phrase*, paint it onto the bottom rung of the bottle rack, and then add *his* signature in the form of the *inscription*—exactly as he had provided it—thereby creating a “readymade from a distance.”⁸ I have emphasized the words “phrase” and “inscription,” for it is worthwhile to note that, in his letter to his sister, Duchamp wrote the first three letters of the word “phr[ase]” before crossing them out and writing “inscription.” He wanted to make it clear to his sister that she was to compose the phrase, but that his signature was to follow in the form of an inscription, which he provided, *ci-après* (meaning, in this context: below). In effect, what he was proposing was nothing short of an artistic collaboration: he was asking his sister not only to sign the work with his name, but to compose the phrase, thereby completing the creative process that was necessary to transform this everyday artifact into a work of art.

Evidence that this reading is correct can be found in the very next letter of their correspondence, which followed almost exactly nine months later (the ideal gestation period for such a brilliant idea): “Did you write the phrase on the ready made?” he asks his sister. If not, “do so,” he says, “and send it (the phrase) to me indicating how you did it.”⁹ Of course, at the time when he wrote this letter, Duchamp could not have known that these items had already been discarded (probably even before Suzanne received his request to inscribe the bottle rack), a fate common to many of the early readymades.

It seems that, at first, Duchamp considered these objects works of art only when they were accompanied by an elaborate phrase, which only attained physical form when the phrase was

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12.4 The Woolworth Building, postcard, ca. 1915. Collection Francis M. Naumann, Yorktown Heights, New York

inscribed directly on the readymade (whereupon the words “phrase” and “inscription” could be used interchangeably). In January 1916, for example, about the same time that he wrote the first letter to his sister about the readymades, he jotted down the following note to himself on a scrap of paper: “Find [an] inscription for [the] Woolworth Bldg. as readymade.”¹⁰ If the readymades serve to expand our definition of art, then the selection of this building serves to define the outer limits of what could be considered a readymade. When construction of the Woolworth Building was completed in 1913 (12.4), it was the tallest building in the world, a record it held until the Empire State Building was erected nearly twenty years later. As far as we know, Duchamp never came up with an appropriate inscription for this structure, so the Woolworth Building never officially attained the status of a finished readymade.

Duchamp’s notion that these objects had to be accompanied by an inscription—a phrase that had nothing to do with the readymade itself—is an idea that originated, I believe, from his friendship with Walter Arensberg, the wealthy poet and art collector, who, with his wife Louise, became Duchamp’s most dedicated American patron. When they met, Arensberg was an active participant in the modern poetry movement, yet he was even more deeply involved in the pseudo-science of literary cryptography, in pursuit of which he spent endless hours searching through Renaissance texts (Dante and Shakespeare were his specialties) for secret meanings he believed were hidden within their linguistic structure (both literally—on the printed page itself—or metaphorically—through elaborate word play).¹¹ Many considered Arensberg’s “discoveries” simply preposterous, Duchamp among them. “It was mostly the conviction of a man at play,” he later recalled. “Arensberg twisted words to make them say what he wanted, like everyone who does that kind of work.”¹²

Notwithstanding his harsh appraisal of Arensberg in later years, initially, Duchamp found his linguistic activities of sufficient interest to establish a system that—for all intents and purposes—opposed Arensberg’s belief that every word in a given literary text was charged with meaning (even if that meaning had to be derived through an elaborate system of deciphering). As Duchamp explained so carefully in the letter to his sister, the inscriptions he



12.5 *Comb*, 1916 Philadelphia Museum of Art



invented for the readymades were to have nothing to do with the readymade itself (“does not have any connection with it”). During the Dada period in New York, Duchamp made several readymades that follow this procedure, such as the *Comb* (12.5), which he inscribed “3 ou 4 gouttes de hauteur n’ont rien à faire avec la sauvagerie” [3 or 4 drops of height have nothing to do with savagery] or the birdcage, thermometer, cuttlebone and marble cube assembly entitled *Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy?* (12.6).

Years later, Duchamp confessed that it was almost impossible to invent an inscription that was completely meaningless: “I was hoping it was without sense,” he said of the inscription he wrote on the snow shovel (12.3), “but deep down everything ends up by having some.”¹³ Just before his death, he admitted that “all associations are permissible,” but explained that inscriptions were added to the readymades in the same fashion that painters add color to their canvases, to provide what he termed “verbal color.”¹⁴ At least one readymade from this period, *Hat Rack* (7.4)—a six-pronged, bentwood hat rack that he hung from the ceiling of his studio—seems to have been made without an inscription (or if one was given, it went unrecorded).

A number of other readymades, however, were given titles meant to amplify or enhance the objects they describe. The title *Fountain*, for example, bestowed on a white porcelain urinal (7.1), was a word chosen to evoke the image of water projecting, an impression clearly linked to the original use for which such a bathroom fixture was designed. *Trébuchet*, the title given to a coat rack nailed to the floor of Duchamp’s studio (see 20.8), is a chess term meaning “to

12.6 *Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy?*,
1921
Philadelphia Museum of Art

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12.7 *With Hidden Noise*, 1916
Philadelphia Museum of Art

trip,” as when a player positions a pawn as an obstacle, hoping his opponent will be forced to stumble over it, crippling his position later in the game. *With Hidden Noise* (12.7) is a ball of twine held between two brass plates that contains an object hidden from sight, which makes noise when the entire assembly is shaken; *Traveler's Folding Item* (1916) is a typewriter cover that can be easily folded up and packed for travel; *Fresh Widow* (9.1) is a miniature French window, and so on.

* * *

In selecting his readymades, the one thing Duchamp insisted upon was that they avoid taste. In conversations with Arensberg in this period, he explained that taste was an operating principle that motivated the work of nearly all artists and writers, even those they had come to identify as leading members of the avant-garde. Picasso, for example, had carefully selected and arranged the elements within his compositions, just as vanguard poets “weighed words,” choosing them for the most appropriate “sound and sense,” so as to attain “a sort of balance.” He used Gertrude Stein and her circle as a typical example of these aesthetic sensitivities. “[They are] people of taste,” he explained. “Even when their taste is bad.” He singled out the bibelots they displayed on the mantelpiece of their apartment in Paris as “objets

d'art which they have picked up in Italy etc etc etc and handle and love etc etc.”¹⁵ These are precisely the aesthetic sensitivities Duchamp intended to avoid. “The choice of readymades is always based on visual indifference,” he later explained, “and, at the same time, on the total absence of good or bad taste.”¹⁶

Should we wish to reconstruct the process by which the ready-made came into being, we must first understand that the idea did not come to Duchamp in a sudden flash (even though the word itself may have).¹⁷ Today we may think of a ready-made as something an artist simply selects and signs, thereby transforming it into a work of art, but for Duchamp, the idea was a more complex construct, one that evolved gradually in a step-by-step process over several years. At first, the phrase (usually provided in the form of an inscription) was considered an integral part of a ready-made, something which helped to justify its classification as a work of art (he later likened it to the process of adding color in a painting). Only later did Duchamp dispense with this notion, allowing some readymades to exist in their own right, or to carry titles linked (usually in an amusing way) to the objects they describe.

Of course, when Duchamp signed the *Bottle Rack* for Rauschenberg in 1960 (12.1), this precise sequence of events was a distant memory. He may have forgotten that he had never inscribed this work in the first place, but he did not forget that, initially, inscriptions were critical components in instating the readymades as works of art. Indeed, in the early 1960s, Duchamp resisted certain interpretations of his readymades, particularly from those who claimed they contained aesthetic features comparable to those of traditional sculpture. “I threw the bottle rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge,” he told Hans Richter in 1962, “and now they [the Neo-Dadaists] admire them for their aesthetic beauty.”¹⁸ In June of 1968, however, in the last televised interview before his death, Duchamp came to accept the fact that a viewer acquires a natural taste for objects seen over a prolonged period. “After twenty years, or forty years of looking at it,” he said of his *Bottle Rack*, “you begin to like it... That's the fate of everything, you see?”¹⁹

Notes:

¹ An exchange of letters between Duchamp and Man Ray reveals that, in accordance with Duchamp's instructions, this bottle rack was purchased from a department store in Paris and sent to the exhibition by Man Ray (letters dated November 26, 1958 and February 6, 1959; Archives of Man Ray, Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris; both letters were published in Francis M. Naumann, ed., Jill Taylor, trans., *Affect., Marcel: The Selected Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp*, [London: Thames & Hudson, 2000], pp. 358-61). Rauschenberg later recalled that he purchased the *Bottle Rack* for \$3 from "Art and the Found Object," a show held in the Time-Life Building in New York in 1959 (letter to the author, December 5, 1995).

² Interview with Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, Ron Padgett, trans. (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p. 47.

³ Quoted in Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2nd rev. ed., 1970), p. 442.

⁴ Taken from an unpublished interview with Harriet and Carroll Janis, with the participation of Sidney Janis, New York, 1953 (transcription Carroll Janis, New York, pp. 25-26).

⁵ Published for the first time in Marcel Duchamp, *A l'Infinifit*, a facsimile edition of manuscript notes (New York: Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery, 1966). English translation in Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp (Marchand du Sel)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 74.

⁶ "The Nude-Descending-a-Staircase Man Surveys Us," *New York Tribune*, September 12, 1915, Part IV (Special Feature Section), p. 2.

⁷ This letter (see 21.1) and nine others were published for the first time in English translation by Francis M. Naumann, "Affectueusement, Marcel: Ten Letters from Marcel Duchamp to Suzanne Duchamp and Jean Crotti," *Archives of American Art Journal* 22, no. 4 (1982), pp. 2-19 (see also *Affect. Marcel*, pp. 43-44).

⁸ Until now, scholars have assumed that Duchamp first carried out the idea of making a readymade from a distance in 1919, when, while residing in Buenos Aires, he sent instructions to his sister on how to make an *Unhappy Readymade*. But as this letter confirms, this process actually first occurred four years earlier, and with one of the very first readymades.

⁹ Marcel Duchamp to Suzanne Duchamp, October 17, 1916 (published in full in Naumann, *Archives of American Art Journal*, 1982, p. 7, and *Affect. Marcel*, p. 45). Several scholars have found my interpretation of this sentence unconvincing, for they believe Duchamp would have

been more specific in his instructions to his sister (see Francis M. Naumann, *Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999], note 15, p. 92). If Duchamp had sent the phrase to his sister in his previous letter, however, then it is implausible that he would now be asking her to send it (the phrase) back to him.

¹⁰ Sanouillet, *Salt Seller*, p. 75.

¹¹ See Francis M. Naumann, "Cryptography and the Arensberg Circle," *Arts* 51, no. 9 (May 1977), pp. 127-33, and Naumann, "Walter Conrad Arensberg: Poet, Patron, and Participant in the New York Avant-Garde, 1915-20," *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 76, no. 328 (Spring 1980), pp. 1-32. 1

¹² Cabanne, *Dialogues with Duchamp*, p. 52.

¹³ Cabanne, *Dialogues with Duchamp*, p. 54.

¹⁴ Quoted in Schwarz, *Complete Works*, p. 456.

¹⁵ Duchamp's conversation and/or conversations with Arensberg are recorded in a five-page note preserved in the papers of Walter Arensberg (donated by Francis Bacon Foundation to the Philadelphia Museum of Art). The note was published for the first time in Molly Nesbit and Naomi Sawelson-Gorse, "Concept of Nothing: New Notes by Marcel Duchamp and Walter Arensberg," in Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon, eds., *The Duchamp Effect* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), pp. 156-57.

¹⁶ Cabanne, *Dialogues with Duchamp*, p. 48. The foregoing paragraph was excerpted from Naumann, *The Art of Making Art*, p. 63.

¹⁷ Shortly after he purchased the snow shovel, Duchamp told Cabanne, "the word 'readymade' thrust itself on me then" (*Dialogues with Duchamp*, p. 48). Rhonda Shearer has argued that Duchamp derived the term "readymade" from the words *toute fait*, as they were used by the French mathematician Henri Poincaré (see Rhonda Roland Shearer, "Coffee Mates," *The Sciences* 37, no. 2 [March-April 1997], pp. 14-15). I have openly disagreed with Ms. Shearer's conclusions (see my letter to the editor and her response in "Peer Review," *The Sciences* 37, no. 5 [September-October 1997], pp. 7, 63-64).

¹⁸ Letter from Duchamp to Hans Richter, November 10, 1962; quoted in Richter, *DADA Art and Anti-Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 208.

¹⁹ Interview with Joan Bakewell for "The Late Show Line Up," BBC Television Post-Production Center, London, June 5, 1968 (full interview published in Naumann, *The Art of Making Art*, p. 300-06; this quotation from p. 304).