Readymade Operations

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In a recent text on the use of the book by Wade Guyton and Christopher Wool, Liz Kotz points out:

> While contemporary criticism has long belaboured the fact that everything is an image now, and that every image is a copy, an "appropriation" [a readymade], critics have paid far less attention than artists to the actual structures of this reproducible image that surrounds us everywhere. [...] And by their nature, technologies of reproduction reduce all visual information–text or image or color or design element–to a common matrix: the Ben Day dot, the grain of the Xerox copy, the dots-per-inch and scanned lines of the ink-jet printer, even the pixel grid of TV screen and computer monitor.[1]

Anything displaced from a certain two-dimensional medium to another—be it painting, photography, postcards, collage, or drawing—points to the ways in which the operations of cropping, scaling, and multiplication are generated through technologies of reproduction. In a digital, late-capitalist age, the crucial form of reproduction is no longer three-dimensional, as it had been in earlier stages of a capitalist society dominated by mass-produced goods, but two-dimensional.

Marcel Duchamp's introduction of the readymade during this emerging capitalist-consumer culture was one of the most influential seizures in the history of twentieth century art production. His use of this method, which he acknowledged as perhaps the idea most essential to his oeuvre, led to a profound and irrevocable crisis of the defining structures, practices, material, and self-understanding of art, including the conditions of its production. Artists have continuously drawn from his gesture, such that the original idea mutated in numerous meandering and unruly ways over almost a century (object trouvé, assemblage, collage, Pop art, and appropriation, to name just a few incarnations). For today's art, appropriation stands as another significant mode of production, and, while related to the readymade, the relationship is often strangely confused and not reflected on by commentators.

For Duchamp, the industrially produced object he presented as a readymade was originally a vehicle for going beyond conventional questions of authorship, craft, medium, and taste. He substituted new questions, regarding the intention and epistemology, the use-value, marketing and distribution of art—reflections which remain to this day both timely and controversial.

Unlike studio precursors intended for his private pleasure, *Fountain* (1917) was Duchamp's first public readymade, and may be regarded as the moment, when his idea made its entrance. Duchamp, his collector friend Walter Arensberg, and Man Ray were members of the board of directors of the American Society of Independent Artists in New York, which had begun to organize an annual exhibition on the model of the Paris Salon. They took "No jury, no prizes" as their motto, borrowed from the founding principle of the 1884 Parisian Société des Artistes Indépendants, and adopted an anti-elitist process, whereby any artist enrolled in the organization could exhibit two works. Duchamp's name never appeared and, though *Fountain* was never even seen by the public, it was to become the most notorious piece in the exhibition. This Bedfordshire porcelain urinal, which Duchamp had selected a week earlier, tipped on its back, and submitted under the name R[ichard] Mutt, generated a controversy among the directors of the Society, who by a narrow majority decided against Mr. Mutt, and excluded the work from the exhibition prior to its opening.

A week after this incident Duchamp transported the urinal to Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery, where Stieglitz photographed it under theatrical lighting in front of an expressionist painting, the only remaining visual trace of *Fountain*, as the object was lost. This photograph has been reproduced in countless publications,

and also served as the model for the edition of *Fountain* produced in 1964 by Arturo Schwarz, in collaboration with Duchamp. A critical commentary on the work, which, apart from the photographic reproduction, is all that allows for its inscription into the cultural archive, appeared a month later in the second and final issue of *The Blind Man*, a journal published by the artist.

For Duchamp, the readymade exists as an idea; the selected object is simply its carrier. From his proposition, "It was always the idea that came first, not the visual example", he drew the logical conclusion that he should make multiple copies of his artworks in order that these may be disseminated throughout the museum world.[2] He then devoted more than half his creative time to carefully inscribing his work into the cultural archive, controlling the distribution of his relatively modest output and purposefully allocating it among key collections and museums. In the *Boîte verte* (1934), we find the following note: "Limit the no. of rdymades [*sic*] yearly".[3] This applies as much to the duplication or editioning of individual readymades as to how many different works there were to be, for the operation of the readymade was put forth not as an opening up of, but rather a radical restriction on the definition of art.

Once art defines itself as an activity primarily manifested in the larger domain of distribution, it encounters new and illuminating problems, as in the case of Duchamp's readymade editions, produced with Arturo Schwarz. Within a few decades, found objects and declared-readymades were neither industrially produced nor traceable. The objects in question thus had to be reconstructed from hand-made sketches or photographs at great expense. For example, *Fountain* was reproduced by a Milanese ceramicist with the aid of Stieglitz's photograph of the original. After Duchamp had authorized the designs for the copies, the "genuine copies of the readymades" were now—nearly forty years after they had been selected from among ordinary objects—apparently conventional sculptures, manually crafted to imitate mass-produced articles.

Industrial capitalism was still in a juvenile stage, when Duchamp introduced the readymade. Early in the twentieth century, the circulation of mass-produced items was still new enough to be dazzling and amusing, particularly for a Frenchman who had recently arrived in New York. It was in this modernist context that the introduction of the readymade took place in 1913. As objects drove people's desire, goods-on-display and goods-for-sale and consumption formed the core that kept things going. The young artist obtained a mass-produced object in order to isolate it from the circulation of commodities familiar to his epoch, and by removing it from its primary motion or path, he proposed that a pissoir as a shape, simply turned on its head, might be considered as enigmatic and beautiful, as a sculpture by Brancusi. It was a reflection on how we look at a work of art as well as on how we perceive mass-produced goods and products that had begun to enter people's imaginations and their daily lives.

However, after initially assimilating things from daily life into the cultural archive, Duchamp would, decades later, confirm them as art all over again, by having them manually-reproduced and placed in various carefully chosen collections. As Martha Buskirk has remarked: "For the readymades, Duchamp had developed new ways of establishing authorship that would operate in tandem with their testing of the boundaries of the work of art. If Duchamp's initial gesture of choosing the readymade referred to mass production, the later forms of reproduction through which the readymades cycled secured their status as art".[4]

The fact that he started out with the idea of making these strange anti-sculptures, and then, later on, started treating them as something to be distributed and replicated, makes those operations even more relevant for today's debates on the production and place of art. His actions traced the movement of the century: by managing to treat his own productions as editionable gestures or operations—the object as the thing of desire— he essentially performs the readymade, thus showing, once again, that it is the operation, not the object that matters. At the same time, he takes this ultimate object of desire to its final resting place by positioning its multiplications (editioned readymades) in what he considered the most reliable collections of art so that his relatively small oeuvre was more likely to be remembered.

Society appears in artworks […]
and is brought to a standstill in them.
—Theodor Adorno,
Aesthetic Theory, p. 236

When the term "appropriation" cropped up in the late 1970s and 1980s, it was a moment that could be called the high point of postmodernism. Images, more than objects, now contained those questions concerning copy, original, and the structures of their reproduction. Artists like Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, Troy Brauntuch, and Dara Birnbaum, to name just a few, isolated, froze, cropped, or duplicated images from mass media's stream of images, revealing "standstills" in these fragments from advertisements, movies, magazines, and television. The focus had moved from the three-dimensional object to the two-dimensional one; pictures had become the focus of desire, replacing the power of objects in the capitalist desire-machine. That infinite desire is bound up with its own reflexive corollary of infinite lack, is the inscrutable myth capitalism is built on, and pictures are the carriers of this myth. Dara Birnbaum's *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1976), for example, literally isolated television "takes", which became the footage Birnbaum used for her video: the exploding woman who whirls and bursts, over and over, transforming her ordinary self into a Wonder Woman and back again, putting one in mind of the Whirling Dervishes' similar transformations to exalted states. In these short, repeated loops, popular culture's extreme exaggerations, which occur in order to try and establish some form of identity, become readable, and entertaining for an art public. As Douglas Crimp proclaimed in his famous essay, *Pictures*: "we are not in search of sources or origins, but structures of signification: underneath each picture there is always another picture".[5]

Johanna Burton distinguishes two types of appropriative strategies that Crimp attempted to establish "a modernist appropriation of *style* and the postmodernist appropriation of *material*".[6] While Crimp deemed the former as aligned with the traditions of aesthetic mastery and thus conservative (Robert Mapplethorpe was his example), the latter was proclaimed as deconstructive and subversive (with Sherrie Levine as the example). Crimp argued that while Mapplethorpe appropriated the stylistic device of pre-war studio photography, Levine boldly re-presented, by simply re-photographing, high art images to bluntly undermine modern myths of canon and mastery. Burton explicates:

> Eighties appropriation, at its best, was deeply invested in precisely these questions—how to disable naturalized master narratives, how to remonstrate the singular and usher in the multiplicitous. [...] The

notion that appropriation might be seen as a mode of revealing language, representation, and even social space to be so shape-shifting as to subsist simultaneously as both weapon and target (and thus as both subject and object) still resonates today.[7]

"The artwork is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture", goes an often-quoted line from Roland Barthes' essay *La mort de l'auteur* Like Richard Prince and Levine, those eternal copyists, sublime and comical, whose profound absurdity precisely designates the truth of image making, the artist can only imitate a gesture forever anterior, never original. Her only power is to combine the different kinds of art making, to oppose some by others, so as never to sustain herself by just one. Always drawn to pictures with the status of cultural myth, Levine developed a repertoire of very simple strategies to reveal the status of these pictures and its cultural and psychological resonance. In an early series, images of mothers with children were cropped according to the silhouetted profiles of Presidents Washington, Lincoln, and Kennedy; the confrontational interweaving of the two images is structured to subvert their mythologies: one image has to be read in relation to the other. Just like a copy is never an exact copy, but a transfer, a translation, so are pictures always built on other pictures, whether these are literally present or not. Any mark takes place on an existing ground, whether a blank page, a canvas, or an existing printed image.

Cindy Sherman's *Film Stills* (1977–1980), in contrast to Birnbaum's video, arguably appropriated *style* rather than material. We are aware that we see a fragment, seemingly a snapshot, but one that is built on quotations of representations of women in Hollywood films, enacting fear and longing, full of the sense of being lost, hesitant, searching, dressed in the fashions of other times, against backdrops of urban loneliness.

Today, three decades later, are artists increasingly working in this manner, appropriating the style rather than the material? Recently Levine herself remarked:

I enjoy collaboration with other artists and fabricators and printers and designers because I like transgressional boundaries, leaky distinctions, dualisms, fractured identities, monstrosity, and perversity. I like contamination. I like miscegenation. I don't think it's useful now to see industrial or information culture as monolithic. I'd rather see them as polyphonic with unconscious voices, which may be at odds with one another. If I am attentive to these voices, perhaps I can collaborate with them to create something almost new.[8]

What has changed in these thirty years? The development from a culture driven by the desire for the enigmatic object to one whose desire is now imbedded in a flat, digital, and to a certain degree inscrutable, two-dimensional aesthetic, has given appropriation the leeway to take up the unruly history of the three-dimensional readymade. However, Duchamp's original questions are still being discussed: What are the defining structures, practices, material, and self-understanding of art, including the conditions of its production?

After the productive twentieth-century expansion of art, the endgames of which seem to be increasingly drawing to a close, the free-floating value attached to art appears to take off, to valorize itself in a possibly dangerous move toward the self-referentiality of *l'art pour l'art*. Common practices today, loosely built on traditions of readymade and appropriation, include the reflexive cannibalization of one's own and others' work, recycling, reassessment, reuse, and repurposing of art *qua* art. As with the culture in general, in art these practices almost seem to form the ground or precondition for making work today. Nicolas Bourriaud dedicates much of his book *Postproduction* to describing this new state of recycling, stating that the artistic question is no longer: "what can we make that is new?" but "how can we make do with what we have?". Melanie Gilligan has written: "Today this type of appropriation can no longer be considered simply as a strategy (such as appropriation art in the '70s and '80s) because it has become such an entrenched common practice", which, let me add, is also deeply indebted to and muddled up with Duchamp's readymade.[9]

Gilligan brings in a larger economic and cultural context through a reading of Fredric Jameson's text *Culture and Finance Capital*:

Whereas the modernist avant-garde of the last century responded to a period of productivity in capitalism, our current economy is dominated less by production and more by an intense expansion of finance capital. [Jameson] calls this new set of conditions a moment when 'capital itself becomes free-floating'. It separates from the 'concrete context' of its productive geography. Money becomes in a second sense and to a second degree abstract (it always was abstract in the first and basic sense). What is being discussed here is a prevalent condition of contemporary life.[10]

The reframing and reuse of art by itself is thus similar to the rise of money made from money, built on its own circulation rather than on labor or products per se. I would agree with Gilligan that it is likely that any art production today that might challenge these circumstances will need to do so through a framework that also addresses today's cultural self-cannibalization—and this is the operation of the readymade.

[1] Liz Kotz, "The Treachery of Images: Christopher Wool and Wade Guyton", *Parkett*, no. 83, Fall, 2008.

[2] Marcel Duchamp, conversation with Calvin Tompkins, quoted by the author in Tompkins, *Duchamp: A Biography*, New York, Owl Books, 1996, p. 159.

[3] *Green Box (1934)*, in *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (eds.), New York, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 33.

[4] Martha Buskirk, "Thoroughly Modern Marcel", *October*, no. 70, Winter, 1994, p. 122.

[5] Douglas Crimp, "Pictures", p. 186.

[6] Johanna Burton, "Subject to Revision", *Artforum,* October, 2004, p. 259, speaking about "Appropriating Appropriation", by Douglas Crimp.

[7] Burton, "Subject to Revision", p. 261.

[8] Sherrie Levine, *Artforum,* October, 2007, p. 331.

[9] Melanie Gilligan, "Derivative Days: Notes of Art, Finance, and the Unproductive Forces", *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 69, March, 2008, p. 148.

[10] Gilligan, "Derivative Days", p. 148.