

# Art fighting its way back to aesthetics

## Revisiting Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*

Anne Elisabeth Sejten

Claiming that 'art is not what you think it is,' Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago recall certain deep layers of art, layers that have been forgotten, repressed, occulted, or simplified beyond all recognition but layers that are working paradoxically in an 'unsaid' and 'missing' way when it comes to received ideas about art, artistic agency, and artistic experience.<sup>1</sup> Whereas art historians as well as theorists of various orientations have challenged art theory in arguing for the increasing impossibility of defining art for the simple reason of its exploding character during the twentieth century, Preziosi and Farago argue to the contrary. Notably, they draw – if not exclusively – upon an erudite amount of religious and anthropological prehistory of art in order to show how sacral and ritual dimensions inform and interact with received ideas about art. A more or less hidden theological legacy proves to work at the core of our understanding of modern art. If things have changed in the field of art, and changed dramatically within contemporary art, Preziosi and Farago systematically confront those changes with what has not changed. A complex 'art matrix' thus comes to reflect a topology of art since, beyond historical changes and ruptures, art keeps responding to relations that are preserved under continuous deformations. Even though stretched and contorted, thoughts and ideas about art are structurally and virtually rebuilt upon the same topological suspensions, the same old sets of relationships, even when reproduced in displaced form in modern discourses of art. These cross-readings, convincingly presented as deconstructive 'incursions' into a comprehensive landscape of modern discourses on art, are illuminating and most welcome. Explicitly avoiding any desire for 'a new ontology of art,'<sup>2</sup> the authors steadily keep in focus the 'historical conjunction' between the two extremes of defining art – 'art as universally spiritual and art as the product of a particular culture' – insisting on art's 'very oscillatory power' and its 'unresolvability'.<sup>3</sup> So what is at stake in *Art Is Not What You Think It Is* is less art succumbing to the confusion of a permanent de-definition of art,<sup>4</sup> than the fact that art proves to be much more – and something else – than what we think it is. That is why philosophical aesthetics, closely tied to the Enlightenment and the European modern system of arts, necessarily comes under pressure. Aesthetics, however, encounters a similar challenge regarding its deeper, complex meaning, while

<sup>1</sup> Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago: *Art Is Not What You Think It Is*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> See Preziosi and Farago, *Art Is Not What You Think*, xi.

<sup>3</sup> Preziosi and Farago, *Art Is Not What You Think*, 45.

<sup>4</sup> See Harold Rosenberg, *The De-definition of Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

current assumptions about aesthetics might generate spontaneous objections along the lines of: 'aesthetics is not what you think it is.' The refusal of aesthetics is not only 'prehistorically' stated by Plato long before its foundation in the second half of the eighteenth century, but runs almost parallel to the history of the discipline. If it took aesthetics a couple of millennia to be acknowledged in its own right, scepticism already arises in the nineteenth century, starting with Schopenhauer and Hegel, who subordinate aesthetics to the idealistic philosophical systems they were both edifying. Schopenhauer turns down aesthetics as something rather technical in the name of a metaphysics of the beautiful,<sup>5</sup> while Hegel in reality replaces aesthetics, understood literally as a science of sensation, with a philosophy of fine art.<sup>6</sup> Aesthetics, in either case, should certainly not begin with the sensation of the beautiful but with the Idea of beauty. Even for Heidegger, it seems imperative to reject aesthetics, which, because it implies humanism and subjectivity, misses the artwork's potential openness to Being.

Preziosi and Farago further trace the transformation of aesthetics into a philosophy of art in recent philosophy when they take into account the criticism of aesthetics from Heidegger to Giorgio Agamben.<sup>7</sup> Simultaneously, they consider the inevitable loss of aesthetic quality in relation to a culture in which high art and consumerism have become increasingly inseparable. However, thanks to their topological approach, the difference between artistic creations and mere commodities and between the autonomy of art and commodification remains intact or, so to speak, operative, which once again questions aesthetics as much as art. Obviously, aesthetics and art do not represent, nor do they constitute, identical or converging realms of objects, and contemporary art indeed testifies to the caesura running through the humanities that splits art and aesthetics apart even further.

When declaring the decline of aesthetics, art historians as well as philosophers often refer to Marcel Duchamp as an emblematic example. His readymades are clearly artistic, because they are made or conceived by an artist, but apparently they have no real aesthetic quality. Preziosi and Farago rephrase this aesthetic insufficiency in more semiotic terms, linking Duchamp to Modernism and its fundamental problem of 'the opacity of the image in relationship to its meaning.'<sup>8</sup> However, what does it mean to qualify Duchamp's readymades as artistic, but not as essentially aesthetic? Doesn't such a statement imply reducing aesthetics to the aesthetics of the Beautiful? And the Beautiful implicitly taken in its most common and less philosophically unfolded sense? Without reopening the Kantian legacy, which is certainly at stake in these questions, I would suggest revisiting the iconic case of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* in order to discuss the prevalent assumption that contemporary art has eventually abandoned the realm of aesthetics.

<sup>5</sup> See A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. Richard E. Aquila in collaboration with David Carus, New York: Longman, 2008, Third book.

<sup>6</sup> See G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, "Prefatory Remarks," trans. T.M. Knox, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> See Preziosi and Farago, *Art Is Not What You Think*, 134-135.

<sup>8</sup> Preziosi and Farago, *Art Is Not What You Think*, xi.

## Two rejections and one counterattack

Two renowned rejections might serve to orchestrate the discrepancy between art and aesthetics within Duchamp himself, all the more spectacularly as in both cases they took place in cutting edge artistic milieus. In 1912, Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase (no. 2)* was, if not directly refused, somehow censured by the French 'Indépendants' at their Salon of 1917. The Cubist group of painters had kindly let Duchamp know that they wanted him to redraw the painting, which he did. Their hostility might surprise, because this painting connects more to Cubism than it breaks with it, especially through the colour scale, through the way in which a human figure is converted into cubes and surfaces, and through the way Duchamp introduces new dynamic effects by painting the movement of a descending person in several of its almost simultaneous displacements. Perhaps the scrupulous exploration of human movements provoked the hostility to Duchamp, as if his approach to the human figure was accused of being too repellent, too dehumanizing. Whatever the reasons of his Parisian friends, Duchamp experienced the refusal as a betrayal of their otherwise shared belief in the very 'independence' of art and the artist. In spite of being the latest avant-garde, the Cubists' response appeared to be characterized by certain dogmatism.

In any case, Duchamp was resolutely determined to test once again the independence of the artist's own democratic, open-minded organisations and even renew his passion for industrial mass production when, five years later in 1917, he submitted – or rather arranged to be submitted – his famous *Fountain* to the inaugural exhibition of the newly established Society of Independent Artists in New York. By submitting a common urinal that he had turned upside down and signed by a pseudonym, Duchamp certainly wrote art history. An ordinary, manufactured object was designated by an artist to be a work of art. But to become one of Duchamp's most famous works and even an icon of twentieth-century art, it is bewildering to recall that the original piece hardly had time to exist before it was lost, only to become resurrected decades later as replica during the sixties before entering into the most prestigious collections of modern art.

Actually, as few other artworks in modern times, this lost readymade is surprisingly veiled in mythologizing secrecy, probably increased by the fact that the only thing which is left of the original is the photograph that Alfred Stieglitz took in his gallery a few days after the official exhibition opening. It is even hard to establish the true history of *Fountain*, which remains haunted by various contradictory versions that keep on circulating.<sup>9</sup> Because Duchamp himself was a distinguished member of the board of directors at the New Yorker Society of Independent Artists, he went undercover as a certain 'R. Mutt', whose name had signed and dated the urinal. Incidentally, this name in itself has given rise to much speculation, as its pronunciation recalls the German word 'Armut', meaning

<sup>9</sup> In his comprehensive study of *Fountain*, William A. Camfield states: 'Our knowledge of this readymade sculpture and its history is riddled with gaps and extraordinary conflicts of memory, interpretation, and criticism.' See *Duchamp, Fountain*, Menil Collection, 1989, 13.

poverty, but Duchamp is also quoted for having made references to a large sanitary equipment manufacturer, Mott Works, as well as to a cartoon strip character with the very same name of Mutt.<sup>10</sup>

Accordingly, the lost work of *Fountain* is surrounded by an impressive number of stories. Sometimes a puzzling female friend of Duchamp's pops up, creating momentary uncertainty about the true authorship of the work, as well as the ambiguous location of the refused piece, reportedly being stored in the exhibition space behind a partition, which then raises doubts about its storage. But there is no doubt that Duchamp became furious in response to his fellow board members' decision against their own exhibition principles (everyone who had paid six dollars was entitled to show a work), and even more resentful of their conformist reasons for the rejection. His protest against the board's censorship was highly public and sensational, taking back *Fountain* within the first days of the exhibition opening, and resigning from the board of directors along with art collector and critic Walter Arensberg.

If it is interesting to recall some of these incidents in their historical context, it is because they take us to the exact point of transition from modern to contemporary art. What took place between the two rejections, between Duchamp's 1912 painting in Paris and his *Fountain* in 1917, is an oscillation on the threshold of contemporary art. Duchamp had made something happen, an event in the world art that repulsed so many but was met with enthusiasm by only a few, those close to Duchamp. For instance, in the aftermath of the scandal, Louise Norton, who was a friend of Duchamp, wrote a significant article in the contemporary Dada periodical, *Blind Man*. Questioning the odd motives of the mystical artist on behalf of those who anxiously ask: 'Is he serious or is he joking?' she promptly replies: 'he is both.'<sup>11</sup> The ambiguity between humor and gravity, between play and spirit, constitutes precisely the balanced counterattack of both refusals. Duchamp was performing a kind of practical joke, aimed at testing beliefs about art and taste in the art world, but he was also serious. Which made him no less of an artist. The modest porcelain basin, turned into a kind of wild card, was supposed to take place among artworks, as if it truly belonged to the world of art. And when, later on, art history rewrites the lessons of the Duchamp's *Fountain*, these two sides – its humorous questioning of the structures of belief and value associated with the concept of art on the one hand, and its aesthetic obstinacy on the other hand – should both be taken into consideration. 'What you think is art' and 'what you think is aesthetics' are both equally implicated, as we leave Duchamp in his contemporary context in order to re-discover him in contemporary art.

### **Lessons from an onion**

Bearing in mind the complex genesis of *Fountain*, art historian and philosopher Thierry de Duve goes right to the point in comparing Duchamp's *Fountain* with an

<sup>10</sup> See Camfield, *Duchamp, Fountain*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Louise Norton, 'Buddha of the Bathroom', *The Blind Man*, 2 (May 1917), 6.

onion. Its history of reception converges with the history of its peeling. Moreover, de Duve identifies three major layers of what could be said to be the lessons of the readymade and its turbulent history in general. The first layer is the discovery that 'anything can be art'; the second is that 'anyone can be an artist' (even though de Duve objects that the first layer logically must be the consequence of the second one); the third is the discovery that the Beaux-Arts system has collapsed.<sup>12</sup> All these layers, paradoxically, announce figures of contemporary art more than they represent modern art.

According to French philosopher Anne Cauquelin, contemporary art constitutes a rupture with modern art, essentially because of the changed conditions of communication that emerge from a network based information society. The market, the entertainment industry, and art are increasingly intertwined in an untransparent trinity that imposes communication at all instances, whereas the communication system of modern art was based on a separation of communicational instances. The idea of an 'autonomous art' so intrinsically associated with modern art, as well as the image of the artist as someone who solemnly serves art outside the market, have to do with linear communication processes. Communicating on all instances, on the contrary, causes a circular communication in which the whole setting becomes more important than the presumed aesthetic content. Not what is *in* art, the content, but the 'container,' the beholder, is what counts.<sup>13</sup> The artworks, consequently, no longer have solid value in themselves, an inner quality, nor a highly celebrated 'autonomy', but depend on the images and staging in which the communication lets them circulate. This analysis revokes positions of American analytical philosophy, especially George Dickie's influential 'institutional theory', claiming that cultural institutions and sociological structures, such as museums, curators, galleries, art critics, auction houses, etc. constitute the basis of art.<sup>14</sup>

Anne Cauquelin, however, takes contemporary art to a more complex state of aesthetic indetermination, as she specifically singles out Duchamp and Warhol as great pioneers of contemporary art. She calls them 'shifTERS' because they excelled at making connections between the otherwise separate instances of modern art's system of communication. Duchamp was a shifter, because his readymades demonstrated that external features such as an artist's signature and an exhibition space might determine what has value as art. Andy Warhol was a shifter, because he was the first person to mass produce and promote his artworks in the world of fashionable celebrity, even starring himself as a star, mixing work and brand.<sup>15</sup> This performativity, however, does not necessarily signify or announce the final fall of aesthetics. If Duchamp is a performer, it is truly as a transformer, as Jean-François

<sup>12</sup> See Thierry de Duve, 'Why Was Modernism Born in France?', *ArtForum* (January, 2014): 2.

<sup>13</sup> See Anne Cauquelin, *L'art contemporain*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992, 60.

<sup>14</sup> See George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.

<sup>15</sup> See A. Cauquelin, *L'art contemporain*, 63-90.

Lyotard already argues in 1977 in his book on Duchamp.<sup>16</sup> Duchamp transforms the entire field of art, but without excluding aesthetics.

Of course, Duchamp's *Fountain* might very likely represent a ground zero of aesthetics. Replacing an artwork with a trivial article for everyday use implies that the artist has given up his own capability of making art. He is precisely not the one who made it. The urinal is already made, and that is literally what the word 'readymade' means. The value commonly attributed to the original completely loses its signification, because the mass product is replaceable by another completely identical product. Indeed, this loss of 'aura', whose undeniably modernist symptoms Walter Benjamin diagnosed, has led to statements about conceptual art close to those raised above: the artwork can no longer be a source of aesthetic pleasure but is reduced to the concept behind it. The readymade is artistic, because an artist chose it, but it is not aesthetic in the sense of inciting an aesthetic experience or sensation.

However, *Fountain* not only makes art institutional doxa visible; it challenges habitual ways of seeing. Even if Duchamp had submitted another Cubist nude, we might not have been sure to see it properly, aesthetically speaking. The poor urinal, in contrast, breaks through the gaze of habits. In all its industrial nudity – which in a way suggests that Duchamp actually did exhibit a new kind of nude – it reminds us about how much we have become accustomed to see art without really seeing, without experiencing the possibilities it opens. Besides, *Fountain* happens to be almost a small sculpture. Already at the time of its brief appearance, Louise Norton spoke about a little Buddha. No doubt Duchamp's 'joke' also ushers in a new interest for the hidden beauty of industrial design. In a strange way, that object finally fights against its own cultural determination, as if it were a candidate for natural beauty (in the same way that Adorno had to mobilize the natural beauty of Kant against the cultural beauty of Hegel).<sup>17</sup> That is why Duchamp accomplishes a kind of de-territorialisation in the Deleuzian sense of the word. An artwork like *Fountain* causes displacements in the entire social and cultural field. It undoubtedly shows us an article for everyday use, an object normally overlooked by being used, but in doing so it reveals more than its rational relation to the consumer market. Once it is marked by Duchamp's minimalistic operations, its rotation, signature, and date, combined with its isolation in an exhibition space, suggest how it keeps on acting and challenging us instead of collecting dust, as if it was about to say: 'And where do you think I am going?' and 'With which forces do I have to connect in order to create intensities, to take you to somewhere else'? Still referring to a Deleuzian vocabulary, we might talk about lines of flight and the re-territorialisation by means of which art draws out new regions of reality. More modestly, we could argue that Duchamp's readymades maintain aesthetics' continuous and persistent task of establishing relations between sensibility and intellectual attention. Beyond testing the broad-mindedness of his fellow members

<sup>16</sup> See J.-F. Lyotard, *Les TRANSformateur Duchamp*, Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1977, 35.

<sup>17</sup> See T. W. Adorno, 'Natural Beauty', in Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, eds, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated Robert Hullot-Kentor, London, New York: Continuum, 2002, 61-77.

of the Society of Independent Artists, Duchamp more radically tests an aesthetic capacity by obstruction, by a kind of anaesthetizing of the senses. But is this not what all 'difficult' art attempts to do? Such art certainly works against sensibility, but in order to make sensibility capable of resistance, and all the more so since sensibility is damaged and threatened by its ruthless exploitation by mediatized society.

Revisiting Duchamp and his victorious *Fountain* finally invites us to comprehend contemporary art in terms other than those of its alleged dissolution in cyberspace. Nor does contemporary art announce an exit from aesthetics, since modern art does not have the monopoly on the idea of 'aesthetic autonomy' either. On the contrary, Duchamp as a shifter, bridging back and forth between modern art and contemporary art, allows us to think contemporary art more as an aesthetic category than as a historical period. The humble greatness of *Fountain* does not essentially inaugurate a new period of art, leaving aesthetics behind, but points to an art that definitively renounces any a priori determination of what art is, what art can be, or what art should be. In turn, it becomes a matter of increasing the possibilities of art as much as possible, of experimenting as much as possible. Put differently, what contemporary art confirms when we comprehend it through Duchamp's *Fountain* is that art in general is something that can be constructed and deconstructed, built up and decomposed beyond any limit, and, consequently, that this plasticity somehow constitutes the 'nature' of art.

However, that art can be everything does not mean that it can be anything; it rather intensifies the question about what art should be, how artists work with art, and how we work with art. Ultimately, the contemporary art that Duchamp announces and anticipates in the schism between the art scene and aesthetic experience concerns less the doped cultural consumer than those working with how artworks affect them. Because artworks, unlike other objects, are essentially works that work on us, we have to work with them in order to refine our gaze on what we otherwise not would have words or signs for. At that level, no doubt, they are impossible to consume, contrary to cultural consumption that results instead in a destruction of things.

The true lesson of Duchamp's readymade resides in this resistance, which is basically an aesthetic resistance. *Fountain's* sensational appearance, as well as its extraordinary aftermath throughout modern art history, rejoins aesthetics more than it leaves aesthetics behind it, as far as it succeeds in creating a kind of foreign language that de-realizes reality. Such language is symbolic and not merely symptomatic, because, once diagnosed, the symptom would explain the 'cause' of the artwork, becoming subsequently poorer, less interesting.<sup>18</sup> The iconic figure of *Fountain*, in contrast, keeps challenging us. Of course, familiarity with what has become the avant-garde art 'tradition' has long ago replaced the initial discomfort that surrounded its first emergence, but we still cannot get to the bottom of it. Instead of draining it, interpretations of all kinds make it revive. In spite of the fact

<sup>18</sup> See Rainer Rochlitz, 'Symbol and symptom', in *Subversion and Subsidy: Contemporary Art and Aesthetics*, translated Dafydd Roberts, Greenford: Seagull Books, 2009, Chapter 4.

that Duchamp's agenda was more than anything else provocative and humoristic, even though he aimed at criticizing severely the narrow-mindedness of art institutions, he could not help, as the artist he was, putting an artwork into the world, whose scope, insight, and meaning relate to an astonishing aesthetic integrity. The proof is that we have not lost interest in it but kept on learning from its mute language. That is why Duchamp, inaugurating the process against the aesthetics of modern art, simultaneously marks the necessity of art fighting its way back to aesthetics.

**Anne Elisabeth Sejten** – Professor Anne Elisabeth Sejten teaches Philosophy and Science Studies at the Department of Communication and Art, Roskilde University, Denmark. She specializes in philosophical aesthetics, aesthetic culture, and French literary and cultural theory. Her major books are *Diderot ou le défi esthétique* (Paris: Éditions Vrin, 1999) and the habilitation thesis on the aesthetic thinking of Paul Valéry (published in Danish in 2015 by Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen).

sejten@ruc.dk



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)