

# Duchamp's Temporal Machinations and Postmodern Returns

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"My capital is time, not money."

Marcel Duchamp, 1952<sup>1</sup>

In his interviews with Pierre Cabanne in 1966, Marcel Duchamp described himself as an "ingénieur du temps perdu" 'engineer of lost time'.<sup>2</sup> This label marked Duchamp's efforts to distance himself from art by refusing to assume the mantle of a creative artist. But why call himself an engineer, when rather than designing and manufacturing products, structures or machines, he would apparently devote himself to the expenditure of time? To understand the significance that Duchamp accorded to time, it is important to recall that in his notes he described *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* or *The Large Glass* (1915-23) (fig. 1) as a "retard en verre" 'delay in glass'.<sup>3</sup> He indicated that he used the notion of temporal postponement precisely to avoid allusions to painting and picture making: "Use 'delay' instead of picture or painting; picture on glass becomes delay in glass — but delay in glass does not mean picture on glass" (*Writings* 26). Proposed as a strategy for holding back the visual manifestations of painting, the introduction of delay brings into play a temporal interval or duration that disrupts and forestalls the immediate gratification of the viewer's gaze.<sup>4</sup> It retards the advent of vision by

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<sup>1</sup> Marcel Duchamp quoted in *Life* magazine, 28 April 1952, 109.

<sup>2</sup> Duchamp, *Ingénieur* 19. André Gervais suggests that Duchamp's formulation was inspired by Lebel's text, "L'inventeur du temps gratuit" 'The Inventor of Gratuitous Time' (c.1943-1944), that he claimed to have shown to Duchamp. See Kilborne.

<sup>3</sup> *Duchamp du signe* 41; *Writings* 26. Later compiled as *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (1934; known as *The Green Box*), these notes were intended as a verbal accompaniment to the visual consumption of the *Large Glass*.

<sup>4</sup> For insights into Duchamp's exhibition and viewing strategies and their gender implications in the *Large Glass*, see Rosenbaum.

postponing its emergence as an event.<sup>5</sup> Would this strategy of deferral that postpones the pictorial becoming of painting while enabling its conceptual activation as duration, possibility, and event also apply to the readymades?

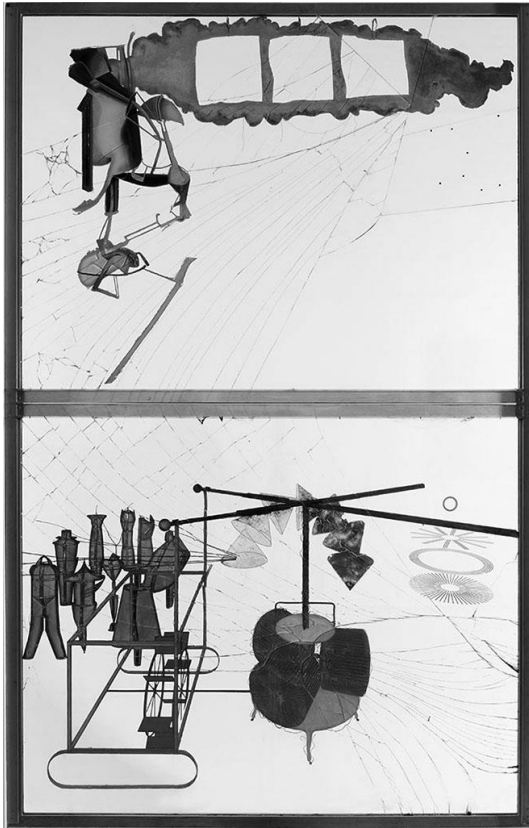


Figure 1: Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even, or The Large Glass (La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même)*, 1915-23. Oil, varnish, lead foil and wire and dust on glass mounted between two glass panels, 9 ft. x 1 ¼ in. x 5 ft, 9¼ in. Courtesy of The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Katherine S. Dreier Bequest. © Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2019.

Duchamp's interest in temporal concerns emerged in his elaborations of the readymades, starting in the mid-1910s and continuing through his late works in

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<sup>5</sup> For Duchamp's notes as verbal machinations in the *Large Glass* and the temporal conundrums implied in its relations to his final work *Given*, see Lyoard, *Transformateurs* 139-70 and 189-206.

the mid-1960s. Duchamp's playful designation of readymades as articles of "lazy hardware" invites further attention, since it pervades his artistic corpus.<sup>6</sup> It includes references on rotating disks with puns in *Anemic Cinema* in 1926, the title of his 1945 window display for André Breton, *Lazy Hardware*, and his catalog cover and etching in 1964 which accompanied the re-issue of the readymades with Arturo Schwarz in 1964. Was Duchamp's allusion to laziness a way to emphasize the suspension of the readymade's utilitarian function in having been appropriated and retooled in the service of art? Or was it a reflection on the dilemma posed by the readymade, since the act of artistic making comes too late, intervening in the wake of its mechanical reproduction. But can this belatedness, this delay or postponement emerge as a sphere of "activation," a moment brought to life by the intervention of spectators as future contributors to the creative act? Like Duchamp's other forays into the realm of industry, these temporal mechanics and machinations will be shown to "strain" rather than affirm the laws of physics.<sup>7</sup> Starting with an analysis of readymades that explicitly engage with the idea of time, this article refocuses on late works from the mid-1960s. These late works reprise and revisit the legacy of the readymades by exploring temporal concerns at issue both in their production and their consumption. This temporal strategy will challenge the logic of artistic creation, subverting artistic production through activation of the creative potential of consumption. Staging the impossibility of defining art, these temporal machinations driving the work's unfolding as an event will continue to fuel its potential for happening.

### Delay, Postponement, or Just Laziness?

To better understand the importance that Duchamp accorded to time, it is important to retrace some of his earliest explorations of this idea in his readymades. *Comb (Peigne, 1916)* (fig. 2) bears an explicit reference to time: "FEB 17, 1916 11 A.M.," presumably referring to the object's creation, only to be contested by other inscriptions. This grey steel dog comb is marked by a French punning inscription on its edge: "3 OU 4 GOUTTES DE HAUTEUR N'ONT RIEN A FAIRE AVEC LA SAUVAGERIE" '3 or 4 drops of height have nothing to do with savagery,' a time indicator "FEB 17, 1916 11 A.M." (lower left) and "M.D." (lower right). "GOUTTES DE HAUTEUR" puns with a taste or drops of authorship (*goût d'auteur* or *gouttes d'auteur*), suggesting a minimization of authorship which, while not altogether reducible to "savagery," does not amount to making art. The inscription playfully "diagnoses" the lack of time in the "making" of the readymade, since its artistic production is supplanted by

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<sup>6</sup> For Duchamp's allusions to laziness, see Marcadé.

<sup>7</sup> On Duchamp's attempts to "strain" the language of science and technology through his playful physics, see Roberts 63.

technological mass-production.<sup>8</sup> The regularity of serial production is playfully evoked through the comb's teeth used for dressing hair to bring one's appearance into order. Designed to tame unruly hair (hence the allusion to savagery), the comb regulates its flow by smoothing and straightening it out. Duchamp's enigmatic pronouncement, "Classify combs by the number of their teeth," suggests that the comb's regulative function is variable, depending on the hair's thickness. The number of teeth determines the gap or interval between them and hence the comb's capacity for "proportional control" (qtd. in Schwarz 194). The more teeth, the lesser or smaller the gap (*écart*), thus approaching an infinitesimal difference or the *infrathin* (*inframince*). Indeed, Duchamp described *Comb* as a "remark about the infinitesimal."<sup>9</sup> For Thierry Davila, Duchamp's *infrathin* becomes a means "to open the field of perception" through the recognition of infinitesimal differences (16). Marking the imperceptible distinction between the mass-produced original and its copy, this minimal gap also introduces a temporal interval where difference emerges as a function of deferral. Although amounting to almost nothing, this imperceptible difference can make a difference by becoming a source for creative making. For the readymades' serial production opens a temporal interval whose belatedness fuels its potential for becoming. The lack of time incurred in the making of the readymades is postponed, so that it retains its event-making potential.<sup>10</sup>

Duchamp's inscription of date and time "FEB 17, 1916 11 A.M." on *Comb* may appear straightforward at first, but it raises additional questions upon further reflection. Traditionally used in art and literature to mark the execution of a work, dates serve to reinforce the authenticity of the authorial signature with an attestation of the work's completion.<sup>11</sup> While indicating an end to artistic production, it is also the marker of a beginning insofar as it designates the work's emergence in the public sphere. However, Duchamp's addition of "11 A. M." undermines through its excessive precision the use of dates as trademarks of artistic or authorial intervention. Was his introduction of timing a way of indicating "the exact date and time in which he found it" (Robinson 80)?

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<sup>8</sup> The "M.D." inscription on *Comb* lower right playfully refers both to the artist's initials and a medical title. The latter designation is not altogether surprising given Duchamp's verbal attempts at doctoring ordinary objects by turning them into readymades.

<sup>9</sup> Schwarz quoting Duchamp in *The Complete Works* 195.

<sup>10</sup> Duchamp's reproduction of 1916 *Comb* on the cover of the avant-garde literary/artistic journal *Transition* (Winter 1937) attests not just to its past, but also to its continued relevance and its contribution to surrealist poetic and artistic experimentation.

<sup>11</sup> The use of dates in prefaces, accompanied sometimes by references to specific locations, was a common practice of twentieth-century authors.



Figure 2: Marcel Duchamp, *Comb (Peigne)*, 1916. Ready-made: gray steel comb, 1 ¼ x 6 ½ in. Courtesy of The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection. © Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2019.

In a marginal note to *The Green Box*, Duchamp distinguished the serially produced readymades from what he called the *readyfound*: “to separate (*écarter*) the mass-produced readymade (*tout fait*) from the readyfound (*tout trouvé*)--The separation (*l'écart*) is an operation” (*Writings* 26; *Duchamp du signe* 41). A closer look at the French formulation reveals that this “operation” is not so much a separation as the creation of an interval that opens up a space of intervention for making and contingency. In qualifying the notion of the “readiness” of the readymade by association with mechanical reproduction (*le tout fait, en série*), he emphasizes its making rather than its finding.<sup>12</sup> The note suggests that the readymade is not simply “made” by the contingency of its being found, since as a serial entity it is already mechanically made. The problem with the readymade is that the act of artistic making comes too late, in the wake of its technical reproduction. But can this belatedness, this delay or temporal interval be retooled as a sphere of “operation” for the emergence of a new understanding of artistic production?

Given the mechanically reproducible logic of the readymade, Duchamp’s temporal index can also be regarded as an ironic comment on the lack of time entailed in the production of a readymade given the commodity’s appropriation into a work of art. More commonly associated with birth announcements, though also duly recorded in death certificates, “11AM” playfully alludes to the “birth” of

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<sup>12</sup> For Duchamp’s debt to Henri Bergson’s “*tout fait*,” see Henderson 63.

*Comb* by inaugurating a new way of making that also marks the end of painting and by extension art. Indeed, the work's title in French, "*peigne*" (the subjunctive form of "to paint" in French) meaning "I ought to or should paint," references both the obligation to paint and its suspension in leaving behind the splashing of paint and intoxication of turpentine. Marking a beginning which is also an end, *Comb* conflates the obligation to paint with its revocation through suspension. Playing on a "co-intelligence of contraries," Duchamp mobilizes this opposition to ironically undermine the event of making this work by transferring the agency of making from the maker to the work (*Marcel Duchamp, Notes* note 185).

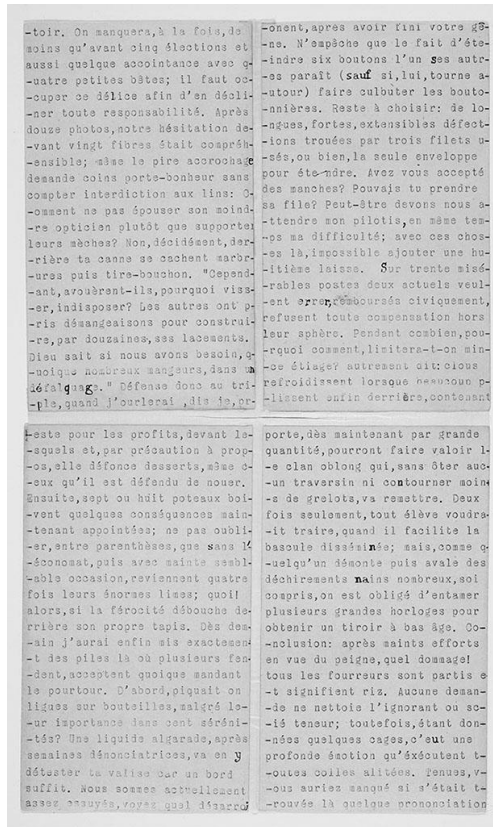


Figure 3: *Rendezvous of Sunday, February 6, 1916 (Rendez-vous du Dimanche 6 Février 1916 [à 1 h. 3/4 après midi])*. Philadelphia Museum of Art © Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2019.

Duchamp's use of date and time indices to subvert the idea of artistic making is mirrored in his collateral strategy challenging the capacity to set up future events by a transfer of agency that activates the event making capacity of the work. In a contemporaneous work to *Comb*, entitled *Rendezvous of Sunday, February 6,*

1916 (*Rendez-vous du Dimanche 6 Février 1916 [à 1 h. 3/4 après midi]*; Philadelphia Museum of Art) (fig. 3), Duchamp produced a work ostensibly designed to set up a meeting with his friends and sometime patrons. Composed of four pre-stamped postcards taped together, this work bears on the front a typewritten, continuous, and nonsensical text (in lieu of the customary brief message). On the back, the postcards are addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Walter C. Arensberg, who had given Duchamp use of a studio in the same building where they lived. So why resort to such a formal and roundabout protocol to set up a time for a meeting when they “saw each other frequently”?<sup>13</sup> The taping of these four postcards together renders them ineligible for posting despite their pre-stamped condition, but furthermore, this attempt to set up a rendezvous could have been more easily handled by leaving the Arensbergs a note and bypassing the mail altogether. Commenting on the postcards’ contents, Duchamp remarked that he took inordinate pains to attain a text that “finally read without any echo of the physical world.”<sup>14</sup> And yet by claiming to set up an appointment with a precise time and date he was in effect upholding the reality of the physical world his text was denying. As a result, rather than merely recording the event of making (as he did with *Comb*), or the deliberate attempt to make an event come about by scheduling an appointment in advance, Duchamp transfers this event-making capacity from the artist to the work via the unfolding of its temporal and conceptual contradictions.

This event-making strategy is spelled out in a note in *The Green Box* where Duchamp outlines his supposed technical specifications for the “making” of the readymades:

Specifications for ‘Readymades’. by planning for a moment to come (on such a day, such a date such a minute), ‘to *inscribe* a readymade’ — The readymade can later be looked for. -- (with all kinds of delays). *The important thing then is just* this matter of timing, this snapshot effect, like a speech delivered on no matter what occasion but *at such and such an hour*. It is a kind of rendezvous. --Naturally inscribe that date, hour, minute, on the readymade as *information*. [A]lso the serial characteristic of the readymade. (*Writings* 32)

Despite their contradictory and logically incongruous claims, Duchamp’s specifications have been interpreted as an affirmation of artistic agency and choice, marking the artist’s encounter and appropriation of a mass-produced commodity. However, a closer look reveals the temporal and logical impossibility of such a claim, since the inscription of the readymade as an idea appears to precede the act

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<sup>13</sup> Schwarz 642. Schwarz’s account is based on unpublished interviews with Duchamp (1959-68). For a subtle discussion of the poetics of this work, see *Perloff* 90-92.

<sup>14</sup> Qtd. in Schwarz 642. David Joselit comments on Duchamp’s verbal strategies to set words free of their conventional meanings and commodities alluded to by the use of postcards (77-78).

of looking for it later (“with all kinds of delays”). This “matter of timing” or “snapshot effect” turns out to be less singular than it initially appears given the irrelevance of the article to the timing of the occasion (“like a speech delivered on no matter what occasion”). This “kind of rendezvous” at once fortuitous but also pre-arranged violates temporal and logical expectations. The pre-arranged encounter preempts the advent of chance, and the logic of the instantaneous snapshot counters the language of duration, based on delay and postponement. Indeed, the inscription of the precise date, hour, and minute as information on the readymade is ultimately irreconcilable with its serial nature as a multiple, suggesting a logical conundrum in the rebranding of a serial issue as a singular item. Duchamp’s “specifications” for the readymades reveal their function as devices driven by competing, contradictory, and ultimately inconsonant claims. These temporal and logical incongruences delay the readymades’ appropriation as art while continuing to fuel their potential for happening. Postponing the attainment of being, they inscribe the readymades into the logic of becoming, understood as possibility, occurrence, or event.

### Turning and Returning Readymades: Rotating Faucets

Duchamp’s return to the readymades followed an increasing number of smaller exhibitions that culminated in his first solo artistic retrospective at the age of seventy-six at the Pasadena Museum of Art in 1963. His involvement in the placement of the readymades displayed in the same room as the *Large Glass* along with all other aspects of the exhibition display provided a unique opportunity to revisit and reassess their significance.<sup>15</sup> In 1964, Duchamp with Arturo Schwarz (a Milan gallerist) reissued *Fountain* along with thirteen other readymades in a limited-edition series of eight copies.<sup>16</sup> Although accepted as a common practice in printmaking and photography, his gesture shocked admirers and critics alike, since it was deemed a sign of Duchamp’s selling out.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, the re-issue of these readymades required time-consuming artisanal and mechanical handywork to generate prototypes made to look like the “original” commodities which had become obsolete over time.<sup>18</sup> Duchamp’s reissue of the readymades was

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<sup>15</sup>According to William Camfield, Duchamp arrived almost a month in advance to work with Walter Hopps on the display of his works for the exhibition (109).

<sup>16</sup> See Adina Kamien-Kazhdan’s excellent introduction to Duchamp’s creative collaborations with Arturo Schwarz and his replicative practices (1-16).

<sup>17</sup> To Max Ernst, the value of Duchamp’s gesture “seemed compromised” (qtd. in Tomkins 426). To John Cage, Duchamp’s activities looked business-like; see Moira and William Roth 156.

<sup>18</sup> Duchamp’s re-issue of the readymades in 1964 reprised his reproductive strategies in his *The Box in a Valise* (1935-41); see Ecke Bonk’s influential analysis of this work’s composing



accompanied by the production of a catalogue entitled *Marcel Duchamp: Ready-mades, etc. (1913-1964)* (fig. 4) for an exhibition held at Galleria Schwarz in Milan in 1964. Designed by Duchamp, the catalog cover reproduced his earlier line drawing of Alfred Stieglitz's photograph of the original, lost *Fountain* of 1917 (fig. 5). To mark this special occasion, Duchamp also produced an etching entitled *Mirrorical Return* (published by Galleria Schwarz, Milan, 1964) (fig. 6) which reproduced his hand-drawn outline of the Stieglitz 1917 photograph of *Fountain* that he had already used for his 1964 book cover. This proliferation of reproductions in Duchamp's works attests to the importance of duplication as a "mirroring" device that figures the reproductive logic of his works. It also alludes to the reproductive aspects of the printing process itself, since the printed image is the mirror image of a reversed copper plate. Not only does printing require mirror rotation and inversion, but it also involves temporal delays incurred in the production of the printed image through multiple impressions that take place over time.

*Mirrorical Return* is a complicated work not just in terms of its visual and technical production, but also in terms of the verbal puns and associations set into motion by Duchamp's wordplays in his titles and caption. In the etching, the image of the hand-drawn outline of the Stieglitz photo of Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) is framed by playful yet cryptic inscriptions: the title on the top, "AN ORIGINAL REVOLUTIONARY FAUCET," a subtitle underneath, "MIRRORICAL RETURN," and a caption on the bottom, "A FAUCET THAT STOPS DRIPPING WHEN NOBODY IS LISTENING TO IT." Although mysterious to the point of obtuseness at first sight, this etching provides important albeit belated meta-commentary on the visual, verbal, and conceptual mechanics at work in the original, unexhibited *Fountain*.<sup>19</sup> To unpack these issues, a brief consideration of the some key elements of *Fountain*'s visual presentation are in order. The urinal's physical rotation preempts its use as a drain, while its verbal designation as "Fountain" inverts its function by re-assigning to it an active role as a device for splashing water. By switching back and forth between male and female functions (as reflected in its alternate descriptions based on its shape as a "Buddha" or "Madonna of the bathroom"), *Fountain* mobilizes gender while disabling through rotation the consolidation of sexual difference.<sup>20</sup>

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elements, production, and multiple iterations (257-301). Also see Martha Buskirk's analysis of Duchamp's efforts to reproduce both extant and lost works (116-19).

<sup>19</sup> For a comprehensive account of the history and aesthetics of *Fountain* in its 1917 context, see Camfield 13-60.

<sup>20</sup> See Louise Norton, "Buddha of the Bathroom"; also see Carl van Vechten's description of *Fountain* photos as looking "like anything from a Madonna to a Buddha" (Stein and Van Vechten 59).

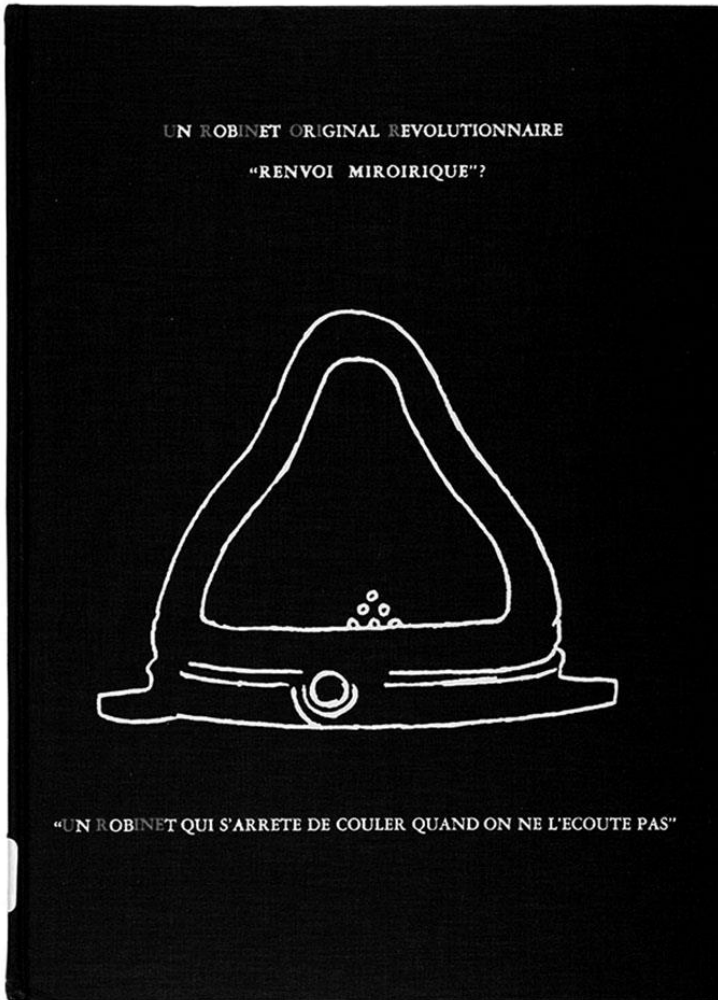


Figure 4: Front cover for *Marcel Duchamp: Readymades, etc., 1913-1964* by Arturo Schwarz with contributions by Walter Hopps and Ülf Linde. Paris: Galleria Schwarz and Le Terrain Vague, 1964. Courtesy of Menil Collection, Houston. Gift of Arturo Schwarz. © Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2019.



Figure 5: Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917. Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz of lost original. Assisted ready-made: urinal turned on its back. Courtesy of The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection. © Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2019.

It redeploys a receptacle of bodily refuse kept out of sight as a fountain whose display will fuel the speculative market forces involved in the public consumption of art. This rotation de-activates the urinal's use and thus value as a commodity and brings it into position to question the values attached to the work of art.<sup>21</sup> Craig Adcock notes the radically transformative impact of Duchamp's gesture:

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<sup>21</sup> Duchamp's reliance on rotation and inversion recalls his first readymade *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), a bicycle wheel mounted upside down on a kitchen stool whose back and forth rotation introduced movement into art.

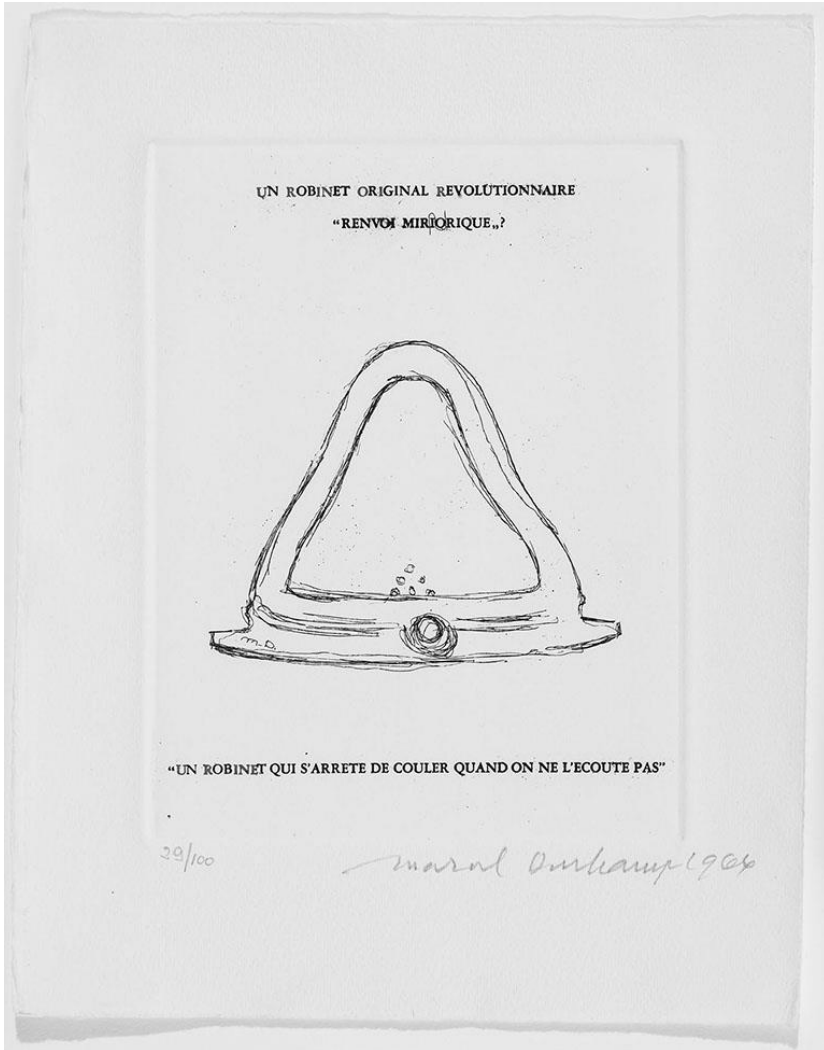


Figure 6: Marcel Duchamp, *Mirrorical Return (Renvoi Miroirique)*, 1964. Copperplate engraving 10 × 7 7/8 in. Photo: Paul Hester. Courtesy of The Menil Collection, Houston. Gift of Arturo Schwarz. © Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2019.

“His chosen objects came out of their rotation — out of their revolution — through the art world transformed and reversed. They began as useful objects that could be bought in hardware stores and ended up as useless art objects commanding the same kinds of prices asked for the traditional sculptures found in museums and galleries” (153). But does such a rotation and inversion ultimately amount to

turning a “urinal into a baptismal font,” as Robert Smithson pejoratively contended?<sup>22</sup>

Unlike the Stieglitz’s photo of Duchamp’s original, lost *Fountain*, his etching *Mirroral Return* drew attention through its technical production to the importance of verbal and conceptual associations for the understanding of this work. To produce the etching Duchamp relied on two copperplates, one with gaps for some letters to allow for the later imprint of the missing letters in red. The use of red in the otherwise black lettering disrupts and delays consumption by inscribing sound and word associations. If the viewer stops listening in, these verbal mechanics are turned off, preempting an experience of the work other than as a purely visual experience. The red letters at the top spell out in French *urinoir* (urinal in English) and (*oir*) a pun on to listen (*ouir* in French), along with allusions to urine or urination in the text below the image. For the faucet to work, the viewer must activate it to set in motion the mechanical play of verbal and conceptual associations. Referring to the readymade’s modes of operation, this “revolutionary faucet” is turned on or off, switching back and forth between its conditions as mass-produced commodity or as art. What this implies, in effect, is that *Fountain*, like the urinal it represents, is a machine rather than an object, a faucet whose “revolutionary” tendencies do not imply the mere negation, abolition, or destruction of art. Revolving between the opposing positions of art and anti-art, *Fountain* emerges as a faucet whose mechanical movements upend the possibility of defining art.

To better understand the mechanical workings of this faucet and the nature of the “waterworks” implied in its use as a urinal/fountain, it is helpful to refer to the etching’s bottom caption: “A FAUCET THAT STOPS DRIPPING WHEN NOBODY IS LISTENING TO IT.” This caption is a reproduction of the second part of a sentence found on Duchamp’s cork-screw puns recorded on a set of rotating disks for his film *Anemic Cinema* (1926). The full sentence on the disk reads: “Among our articles of lazy hardware we recommend a faucet that stops dripping when nobody is listening to it” (*Writings* 106). Rotating back and forth like faucets and alternating with optical disks depicting cork-screw spirals, the revolving and reversible mechanics of puns are associated with articles of lazy hardware. This network of allusions that links readymades, faucets, the reversibility of mirrors, and the mechanics of puns is no trivial matter, since Duchamp kept returning to and retooling this conceptual nexus throughout his corpus. Indeed, further consideration of the generative import of puns in multiplying meanings and expanding time through their humorous, poetic, and conceptual associations proves fruitful to understanding how the machinations of readymades may be implicated in the making of time.

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<sup>22</sup> Qtd. in Moira Roth 136. For Smithson’s position on the readymades in the 1960s, see Lütticken 2-3.

Moreover, the allusion to laziness associated with hardware articles, aka readymades, is not insignificant and bears further attention. Indeed, as Maurizio Lazzarato notes, by privileging laziness, Duchamp discovered a condition previously neglected by philosophy, namely “laziness as another way of experiencing time and lazy action as a new way of exploring the present as duration, possibility, and event” (17). Duchamp’s insistence on laziness is not surprising given the readymades’ dubious temporal standing as mass-produced articles that required little or no time on the part of the artist for their physical production. The readymades’ lack of originality in their modes of physical production is associated with the lack of originality in the workings of puns. For puns are “ready-made” insofar as one stumbles on them, turning on or off the flow of verbal associations like spigots.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, as Michael North observed, puns function like clockwork in manufacturing meanings in “a wholly automatic and unmotivated way” (98).<sup>24</sup> Does this mechanical and automatic dimension of the workings of puns prove relevant to an understanding of the event-making capacity of the readymades?

Duchamp reprised and consolidated this analogy of readymades with faucets which act like puns in a window display he collaborated on with André Breton, photographed by Maya Deren. *Lazy Hardware* (1945) (fig. 7) was designed to celebrate the publication of André Breton’s *Arcane 17*, 19-26 April 1945, at the Gotham Book Mart in New York. Marking the occasion of his romance with Elisa Bindhoff (who became his third wife), Breton’s effusive book abounds in references ranging from arcane mythology to current history (World War II). The window installation displays a headless manikin with a maid’s apron and a faucet attached to her right thigh, a not so veiled reference to Rose Sélavy (a pun on watering, “arroser” in French and an allusion to *Fountain*). This figure reprised Duchamp’s submission of a female mannequin cross-dressed as a man to the International Exposition of Surrealism at the Gallery of Beaux-Arts, Paris 1938.<sup>25</sup> Rose was Duchamp’s female artistic alter ego, his sometime collaborator who “co-signed” or even “signed” some readymades, only to be later emerge as “author” in her own right of *Rose Sélavy*, an anthology of puns. Rose was also a stand-in for Duchamp’s collaborations with Man Ray and Marc Allégret in the making of *Anemic Cinema* (1926), where she was listed in the credits as signatory of the copyright.<sup>26</sup> Craig Adcock observes that Rose’s faucet is aligned with Duchamp’s

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<sup>23</sup> For an in-depth analysis of Duchamp’s readymades as verbal and visual puns, see my *Unpacking Duchamp* 75-96.

<sup>24</sup> For a historical account of Duchamp’s mechanistic vision related to clockwork and automata in the *Large Glass*, see Henderson 94.

<sup>25</sup> For a description of this mannequin, treated “as a coat rack” according to Man Ray, and the details of the exhibition, see Kachur 31-63 (especially 47).

<sup>26</sup> The ironies of using a thumbprint as a signature abound, since Rose was by no means illiterate and had no hand (so to speak) in the making of the film.

and Breton's reversed and rotated reflections in the glass (163). Does this alignment imply a potential allusion to the subversion of authorship by the generative flow and playful mechanics of readymades and puns?



Figure 7: Marcel Duchamp, *Lazy Hardware*, partial view of window installation for André Breton's *Arcane 17*, 19-26 April 1945, Gotham Book Mart, E. 57th St. New York, Photo: Maya Deren, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Marcel Duchamp Archive. © Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2019.

Another photograph showing Duchamp installing the faucet in *Lazy Hardware* is signed by him with a truncated inscription "... that stops dripping when nobody is listening to it." Reprising his analogy of puns and readymades with lazy hardware in *Anemic Cinema*, Duchamp suggests that they manufacture meanings like puns, acting in an automatic, unmotivated way. By operating like puns the readymades transfer creative agency from the artist to the generative and thus creative potential of their mechanical operations. *Lazy Hardware* reiterates the challenge readymades presented to notions of artistic making, since their "already made" status as articles of mechanical reproduction upends artistic creativity by their suspension and delegation of artistic agency.

As in Duchamp's prior works, these artistic machinations like the operations of puns have a temporal dimension. A brief consideration of the background of

the mannikin in *Lazy Hardware* reveals an extensive display of journals and art catalogues from the 1920s to the 1940s, books on artists like Seurat, Calder, and Picasso, and pictures of Breton and Duchamp. Erik La Prade aptly describes this hodgepodge, haphazard collection of mostly surrealist publications as a “time capsule.” However, this apparent display of Dada and surrealist hagiography is not reducible to a mere effort to record and preserve surrealism in its waning days. The inclusion of photographs of André Breton and Marcel Duchamp made up to look like an eighty-five-year-old man (when he was only fifty-eight) suggest otherwise.<sup>27</sup> Whereas the Breton photo dedicated to Frances Steloff (the bookshop’s owner) serves to mark the author’s celebratory moment, the photograph of Duchamp captures the artist’s image not in the present of the occasion but as a record of a future moment. The photograph acts as a time capsule of sorts, not of the artist’s past but of his future by staging an image of the artist’s becoming rather than being.<sup>28</sup> Upending the commemorative function of the photograph as a ready-made rendering of an event, Duchamp redirects attention to its generative potential. By postponing the imprint of the present, Duchamp’s photograph holds out the advent of becoming.

### Mirrorical Returns?

A final look at *Mirrorical Return* demonstrates how Duchamp’s appeal to the mirror and the notion of return (*renvoi miroirique*) in the etching’s subtitle illuminates the work’s temporal conundrums.<sup>29</sup> His reference to the “mirror” alludes to the specular principles of reflective projection, rotation, and inversion operative in the readymades: it points to the dynamic back and forth that emerges from the juxtaposition of the mass-produced commodity with its ostensible artistic counterpart in a process of mirror-like duplication and inversion.<sup>30</sup> By holding up a mirror to the work of art, its mass-produced analogue emerges as its “mirrorical return,” but the image it reflects or sends back can no longer be associated with conventional ideas associated with art. By providing a literal reflection of the mimetic impulses of painting, the readymade turns “representation in art against art itself,” since the readymade “no longer makes representation *represent* an original, but the *death* of the original and original creation in the arts” (Küchler 113). The meaning of artistic mimesis as imitation or reproduction is subverted

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<sup>27</sup> For an analysis of the history of this photograph and its photographer, see Molderings 9-18.

<sup>28</sup> Herbert Molderings links Duchamp’s gesture to photography understood as a time-machine (54-59).

<sup>29</sup> This term first appears in Duchamp’s notes to the *Large Glass* in the section describing the “Oculist Witnesses” (*Writings* 65).

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of the mirror status of the commodity, see Derrida 155.



through the mechanical proliferation of copies which erode the idea of originality. This subversion of originality is staged and performed at the bottom of the etching, signed and dated Marcel Duchamp, 1964 on the right and the French phrase “*Bon à tirer*” on the left. Commonly used by artists to indicate a final trial proof for printing, this technical term is a sign-off signifying readiness (“good for printing” or “ready to go”).<sup>31</sup> But by publishing these etchings as an edition of 115 proofs, rather than reserving “*Bon à tirer*” for the final proof alone, Duchamp subverts finality by suggesting each etching’s readiness to act as a proof, thus making future printings happen. His signature appears to endorse the print’s reproductive capacities in the future, rather than designating him as its original maker in the past. But Duchamp’s deliberate diminution of artistic originality is haunted by the fatality of death, since the French phrase “*Bon à tirer*” playfully suggests that he is “good for shooting.” The artist’s witty offer to put himself up for target practice is not altogether surprising, since as the “maker” of the “already-made” readymades he rendered the artist incidental to the making of the work, justifying his claim that a “Ready-made is a work without an artist to make it” (Roberts 47).

The specular connotations of the etching’s subtitle “MIRRORICAL RETURN” are coupled with temporal intimations, since “return” (*renvoi* in French) signifies return, sending, or throwing back (a ball or a sound), as well as to postpone, adjourn, defer, or remand. What is the function of this temporal inscription into the mirror-like dynamics of the readymade? *Mirrorical Return* suggests that *Fountain* is not an ordinary object but a revolving mechanical device, a faucet designed to switch between the on or off positions. This work attests to Duchamp’s deployment of the commodity brought face to face with its “artistic” counterpart as its mirror image. But this “face-off” engineered through rotation implies a send-off, since what returns has been turned on its head through inversion. *Mirrorical Return* thus emerges as Duchamp’s ingenious solution to the erosion of art by visual consumption, one that does not fall prey to the denial or negation of art that would simply reinforce its definition, since as Duchamp observed, “whether you’re anti or for, it’s two sides of the same thing” (Roberts 62). Resisting the temptation to valorize the art object or its mass-produced counterpart, or attempt to overcome their antithesis, Duchamp plays on the opposition of these terms by turning this opposition into a work in its own right.

Duchamp’s elaboration of the idea of “mirrorical-return” in 1964 as a meta-commentary on the readymade as a visual and verbal faucet and the erosion of the authorial function was followed a couple of months later by a serial work, in triptych as it were, of three commercially available mirrors.

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<sup>31</sup> Frances Naumann mentions that Duchamp used a “sign off” (OK accompanied by his signature) to authorize the schematic drawings made by a professional draughtsman for Schwarz’s edition of the replicas of readymades (244).

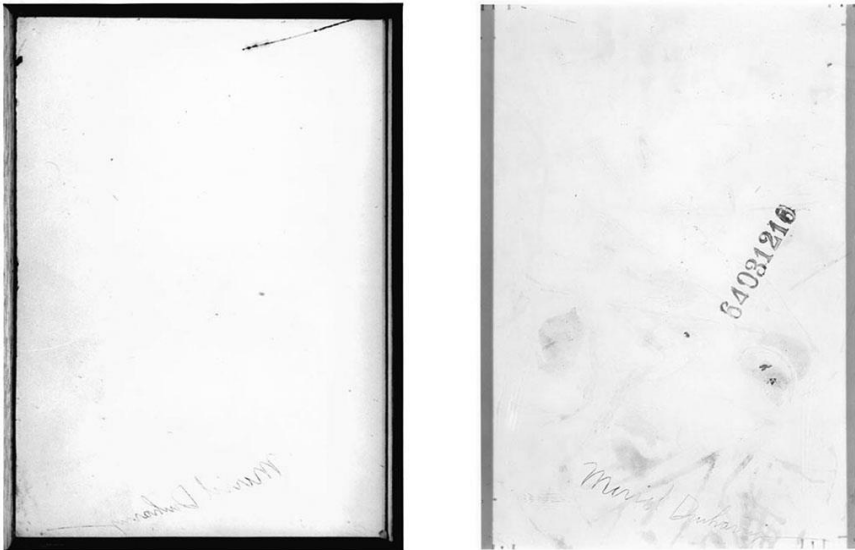


Figure 8: Marcel Duchamp, one of *Three Mirrors* (Milan, 1964). Three mirrors, each 13 ¾ x 9 3/8" stamped verso with a production number. Photo Enrico Cattaneo. Courtesy of Arturo Schwarz. © Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2019.

Duchamp's visit to Enrico Baj's exhibition of broken mirrors for the *Thirteenth Milan Triennial* in 1964 may have provided additional stimulus to his long-standing explorations of mirror projections, reversals, and temporal effects as outlined in this paper. His appropriation of the three mass-produced mirrors did not entail any alterations, other than the imposition of his signature scratched on the back.<sup>32</sup> Entitled *Three Mirrors* (1964) (fig. 8), the deceptive simplicity of these works, where Duchamp appears to have done nothing or almost nothing at all, has received no critical attention to date.<sup>33</sup> Each mirror bears the stamp of its production number on the back referencing the readymades as mass produced multiples. However, despite its apparent affinities with readymades, this work was not designated by Duchamp as such. Why not? Arturo Schwarz reported that upon signing the three mirrors, Duchamp remarked: "I am signing readymade future portraits" (841). Duchamp references the idea of the readymade here, not as a way of describing the status of the mirror as a mass-produced object, but rather as way of designating its technical capacities for generating "readymade future portraits." What Duchamp signs in effect is not the mirror as an object, but

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<sup>32</sup> See Schwarz 841.

<sup>33</sup> For a preliminary study, see my *Drawing on Art* 222-25.

rather the mirror as a replicative device that recalls mechanical reproduction. Providing a perfect likeness but without succumbing to manual virtuosity, the mirror alludes to the mimetic aspirations of painting but with a twist, given the optical inversion of the reflected image from left to right.<sup>34</sup> The latter is a reminder to the onlooker of the duplicity of the mirror as a replicative device, since its visual fidelity arises from the infidelity of optical inversion.<sup>35</sup> It is important to keep in mind that the mirror as technical device requires activation by the spectator, who by looking “lends” his or her face as it were. The intervention of the viewer’s gaze leads to the “making” of one’s portrait, as a “snapshot” effect akin to photography. The image in the mirror reflects the passive capture of the viewer’s presence, but this meeting of the onlooker and the mirror also reveals the creative potential of spectatorship. For the image produced as the result of this chance encounter takes on the character of an event, whose singularity ironically arises from repetition and reproducibility.

However, the placement of Duchamp’s signature on the mirror’s bottom center (instead of the conventional left or right margins) is confusing. Rather than referencing authorship, its location directly below suggests that it may also act as a caption (in describing the image above like a title). By purloining the spectator’s image under the insignia of his own making, Marcel Duchamp signs the future spectator’s look and turns the spectator’s reflection into a work. He utilizes the mirror only to highlight its duplicity by showing that the otherness of the reflected image due to inversion is further compounded by the mirror’s inability to secure self-reflection.<sup>36</sup> Irreducible to an art object or a conventional “work,” Duchamp’s “ready-made portrait” is “cancelled” as soon as the viewer stops looking in the mirror. Turned on or off by the visual conceit of the spectator, *Three Mirrors* demonstrates that the mirrors’ capacities for reflection are always open to appropriation by the spectator (whose position can be occupied by anyone). By casting their fidelity into doubt, the mirrors undermine the spectator’s image by presenting it as already belonging to someone else. As signatory, Duchamp did not sign the image itself (since the mirror image is always provisional) but rather the mirror as a device for generating readymade portraits. By signing future readymade portraits, Duchamp reminds spectators of the provisional and fleeting nature of their reflected image, thus exposing mortality as a condition endemic to the human gaze.

Why did Duchamp choose to sign three mirrors instead of just one? Was it a strategy for disrupting the spectator’s gaze through the inscription of contingency and chance? *Three Mirrors* alludes to the role played by chance in prior works such

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<sup>34</sup> See Victor I. Soichita’s history of the mirror as an iconic device for representing pictorial depiction and the painter’s craft (184-91).

<sup>35</sup> For Lyotard’s remarks concerning the philosophical and rhetorical implications of the duplicitous nature of the reflected image, see *Les Transformateurs Duchamp* 117-19.

<sup>36</sup> See David Lomas’s psychoanalytic analysis of mirrors and their narcissistic import (26-54).

as *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913-14) and other preparatory works to the *Large Glass* (1915-23) such as *Three Oculist Witnesses*, which refer to threes or multiples thereof. *Three Mirrors* also represents an instance of “canned chance,” given the mirror’s arbitrary and fleeting capture of the viewers’ reflections. Duchamp claimed that three functioned for him not as an ordinary number but as an indicator of contingency and multiplicity, that is, in excess of, one (unity) and two (dualism).<sup>37</sup> We now begin to understand why this work involves three mirrors instead of just one or two. Rather than reinforcing identity through the duplicative powers of the mirror, *Three Mirrors* brings into view the contingent nature of the onlooker’s gaze whose multiplicity is no longer reducible to either identity or dualism.

However, given its reliance on the spectator’s look, does *Three Mirrors* represent a return to representation and by extension retinal art? This is not the case, since the mirror as an optical device replicates and distorts ordinary vision through inversion, thereby inscribing a conceptual dimension into the meaning of this work. Undermining the immediacy of vision through optical play, the mirror “anticipates . . . the labor of vision,” to use Merleau-Ponty’s terms (168).<sup>38</sup> *Three Mirrors* stages Duchamp’s invitation to the spectator to join in the creative act by transforming the spectator into both author and subject matter of his or her work (as a “readymade future portrait”). Unlike earlier readymades that drew on their resemblance to ordinary commodities to question the idea of art, this work commodifies the viewer’s gaze by purloining his or her image through the intervention of their look. However, unlike commodities, the mirror image resists monetization since it ceases to exist when no one looks at it. By casting a new light on the viewer (a previous blind spot in the history of art) and activating this position, he restores to spectatorship the capacity of creative making. The spectator’s look is revealed not just as a testament to consumption but also as a productive gesture that holds out an open-ended promise of future portraits.<sup>39</sup> Challenging the premises of art, this work accomplishes its aim imperceptibly, without drama and fanfare. Unlike earlier readymades such as *Fountain* that flaunt their explicit usurpation of art, this work bypasses and postpones the subterfuge of its intervention by proposing something that is shocking precisely because it is so innocuous as to appear be about almost nothing at all.

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<sup>37</sup> Cabanne 47. In his conversations with Arturo Schwarz, Duchamp reprised and qualified this formulation with an erotic undertone: “two is the couple, and three is the crowd” (Schwarz 128).

<sup>38</sup> See also Diana Silberman Keller’s analysis of the mirror’s capacity to mediate sight (52-54 and 100-02).

<sup>39</sup> For a reconsideration of the productive potential of consumption based on the systematic manipulation of signs, see Baudrillard 275-76.

## Postmodern Returns

Duchamp's imputation of "laziness" to the readymades now begins to make sense, since his gesture of ascribing agency to them serves to reveal their creative potential for production rather than limiting them to the fatal destiny of artistic consumption. In an interview with George Hamilton in 1959, Duchamp elaborated the readymade's strategic function in questioning the definition of art while resisting assimilation to a work of art. The impossibility of providing an essential definition of art across time led him to posit the readymade as a critique of any such attempt at definition: "the Readymade can be seen as a sort of irony, or an attempt at showing the futility of trying to define art," leading him to conclude, "it's a form of denying the possibility of defining art" (qtd. in Gough-Cooper and Caumont 19 Jan. 1959). Attesting to the legitimacy of not defining art, the readymade emerges at once as symptom and solution of the futility of persisting to do so. But this attempt to stage the impasse of defining art is not a useless or empty gesture given its conceptual value and thus critical potential: "You don't know whether you should take it as a work of art, and that is where the irony comes in. . . ." Introduced in opposition to the idea of art but failing to properly sustain it since it bears a mirror-like resemblance to what it challenges as its copy, the readymade emerges as a "a sort of irony," rendering manifest the incongruity between what might be expected from art and what actually occurs.

Duchamp's description of the readymade in terms of irony represents an ingenious solution since it repositions and reconfigures the readymade as dynamic machine that draws its energies from and is fueled by the incongruence of its opposing conditions. Irreducible to art or anti-art, the readymade occupies a sphere of possibility and becoming, rather than mere objecthood: "The possible implying / the becoming — the passage from/ one to the other takes place/ in the infra thin" (*Marcel Duchamp, Notes* no. 1). Duchamp's readymades recast the work of art in the mode of an event, affirming becoming rather than being, understood as possibility, occurrence, or event. Consequently, the event of making of the readymades does not end with the artist as original creator or maker, since it continues to unfold its possibilities for occurrence to the future spectator. This activation of spectatorship enacts and performs Duchamp's claims on posterity as "a form of the spectator" (Cabanne 76). Straining the laws of physics, Duchamp's machinations outline the advent of the post-modern, understood, according to Jean-François Lyotard, as a temporal incongruence that operates according to the paradox of the future anterior.<sup>40</sup> Subverting the claims to art through a strategy of deferral, Duchamp restitutes to readymades their transformative potential, not to be, but to happen, and to continue to make things happen. His adoption of laziness

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<sup>40</sup> For Lyotard's formulation and critique of the temporal paradoxes of postmodernism, see his "Answering the Question" 81.

as a playful posture reflects the artist's recognition of stopping short of making to allow other forms of making to happen.

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