

The Value Industry

Reflections on Art, Money and Celebrity

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extract from **Chapter 4: Authenticity and History**

The Ursprung of Modern Art

Artworks sometimes possess cultural value due to their precise position in the narrative of art history. A work's being made at a certain moment in time can entail that it is culturally significant, and therefore cherished and revered. This is because history – the mere fact of a work's being made at a particular point in time and then having trickle-down art historical consequences – creates cultural value. History so construed does impinge upon economic value in numerous ways, not least in the sense that a work's historic importance can tend to render it truly priceless, but that shall not be our concern here. Consider, for instance, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917): as an object, it is not much to look at and might even be thought crass, but through the historical narrative of the dawn of the readymade and Duchamp's struggle for recognition, the work is transformed into a wonder of art history. The cultural value of the work is, however, even greater than the standard narrative admits. *Fountain* sits there brooding quietly in a corner of Tate Modern; it knows that you valorise it and it knows that you do not know the half of it. Duchamp's *Fountain* is not quite what it seems, and for that very reason it is more important and ground-breaking than we ordinarily imagine, for not only did it revolutionise the concept of art, but it also prefigured the way in which art became a commodity on the modern market. This immense cultural value surpasses any price that could be put upon it, and yet the precise details of its history are little known. The basic story is well known. In 1917, Duchamp bought a standard Bedfordshire model urinal from a New York ironmongers' store. Struck by the aesthetic of this everyday utilitarian object, he turned it on its back, signed it, 'R Mutt 1917', in black pen and submitted it to the Society of Independent Artists open exhibition. The committee, of which Duchamp was a member, rejected the work, despite the fact that the only condition for inclusion was payment of the \$6 entry fee, which R Mutt had done.

Duchamp remained quiet about R Mutt's identity and watched as a fierce debate raged: it was thought indecent and an affront to the nobility of fine art, being as it was an everyday bathroom appliance. It is difficult now to imagine, still less to empathise with, the outrage, but at that moment, nothing like it had been done before. In some versions of the story, eternally unconfirmed, the work was included in the exhibition, hidden behind a screen as a half-hearted concession to the Society's democratic principles. In any case, the public never set eyes on it.

The next chapter in the story is perhaps lesser known. An undefeated and good-humoured Duchamp could not let this work – which he, after all, thought to be a cataclysmic breakthrough – go unnoticed, so he took *Fountain* to be photographed by Alfred Stieglitz. The picture was published in avant-garde magazine *The Blind Man*, along with a letter from Stieglitz and articles by artist Beatrice Wood and art collector Walter Arensberg, having already been gleefully publicised by the New York Dadaists. It was an anonymous editorial, believed to have been written by Wood (who was, incidentally, in love with Duchamp), that would spell out the artistic revolution. The editorial stated: 'Whether Mr Mutt made the fountain with his own hands or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view - created a new thought for that object'¹.

And here one story ends while another begins. Art would never be the same again; the river of creativity had burst its banks, flooding the cultural landscape with the possibility of a new art. Practically everyone in art today, theorists and practitioners alike, owe some debt to Duchamp, even though it is so entrenched in the canon now that we hardly consider it with more than a vague sigh. Two interconnected things happened: one, art was liberated from the mimesis paradigm in which it had been locked for so long – art no longer had to imitate reality, it could simply *be* reality; and two, in virtue of that, the boundaries for what could be art, and therefore the very definition of 'art', had been widened, never again to be narrowed².

¹ Marcel Duchamp, Henri Pierre Roche and Beatrice Wood (eds), *The Blind Man: New York Dada*, 1917 (New York: Ugly Duckling Press, 2017). This is a centenary reissue of the two volumes of the ground-breaking journal, volume 2 of which contains the reactions to *Fountain*.

² For more on these two points, art as mimesis and the definition of art, see Arthur C Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 29 and 46 respectively.

The effect of *Fountain* was both radical and slow-burning. On the one hand, it sent waves from New York to Europe, questioning the limits of art itself, which was defined academically by painting and sculpture, and still just trapped in a paradigm of mimesis. Duchamp's great coup was to move art away from traditional notions of craft and mimesis, and towards art as an intellectual, rather than purely visual, exercise. *Fountain* thus began conceptual art.

On the other hand, although *Fountain* is now credited as the start of what we might call 'modern art', it would take the best part of fifty years for the face of art to change completely. It was not until art had passed through surrealism, Cubism and abstract expressionism that it would reach its terminal crisis: Clement Greenberg's vision of pure modernist painting as the saviour of art ground to a halt, leaving a void which ultimately was filled with minimalism and pop art. Indeed, once abstract expressionism had faded, Greenberg felt art and himself to be redundant, consequently giving up criticism and living the rest of his days on the back of his reputation alone. It was at this point, when abstract expressionism died and the pure pale of painting had been exhausted, that pop art emerged, hailing a new era of art in which the everyday was transfigured into art, which Danto calls 'the transfiguration of the commonplace'³. But Duchamp was the catalyst for the pop artists who levered art out of a defunct modernism; he was the immediate precursor to the anything goes, post-historical conceptually driven artworld that Danto would eventually characterise as 'the end of art'⁴. The major breakthrough, and the thing that redefined art philosophically, is that the readymade was born with *Fountain*. Duchamp thus provided a fresh challenge to agitated efforts to philosophically describe the nature of art, since, at the turn of the century, philosophers turned their attention away from questions of beauty and towards the definition of art itself. But the principal philosophers engaged in the task of definition – Clive Bell, RG Collingwood and William E Kennick – were still primarily dealing with visual art narrowly construed as painting, sculpture and drawing along the lines of the mimesis paradigm, namely art that attempted to represent or imitate reality, figurative art, if you will⁵. *Fountain* thus presented a challenge to philosophical definitions – how this object could be a work of art could not be comfortably subsumed under any answer to the question of what art it is. It was

³ Arthur C Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁴ See Danto, *After the End of Art*, Chapters 1 and 2.

⁵ Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Dodo Press, 1913); RG Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938); William E Kennick, 'Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?', *Mind*, vol. 67, no. 267 (July 1958) 317-334.

not until the 1960s, with Danto's theory of the Artworld or Dickie's Institutional Theory, that *Fountain* found a place in philosophy and retroactively became the starting point for a new philosophical aesthetics⁶.

R Mutt's intervention has another, much less widely known, chapter with a much more surprising consequence. There are 17 versions of *Fountain*, 15 of which survive today, the original having been discarded as quotidian rubbish. It was not until 1950, however, that Duchamp sanctioned a copy of the original for an exhibition in New York; he did the same in Paris in 1953, which went missing, and in Stockholm in 1963. Then, in 1964, Duchamp permitted his Milan gallerist, Arturo Schwarz, to produce an edition of 8, with 2 artist's proofs, 2 exhibition copies and 1 prototype model. All 16 are exact replicas of the original Bedfordshire model urinal, with the signature of R Mutt reproduced in black paint. It comes as a surprise to some that the archetypal readymade in the Tate Modern is a sculpture of an everyday object, fabricated by artisans and a not found object at all.

This move towards reproducible works of art that could, in theory at least, be reproduced indefinitely, marked a change in the attitude towards the work of art as cultural product. The fact that Duchamp sanctioned a copy as and when it was needed, not placing any especial value on the original or limiting the edition to an absolute finite number, as would have been previously done with sculpture, indicates a moment at which the artwork ceases to be precious as a unique object. This is what Benjamin was talking about when he said film and photography obliterated the aura of the work of art: an object – a painting or sculpture – is a unique thing that was touched by the hand of artist and for ever more, as it persists through time, bears that mark of distinction⁷. The result of this for film is Hollywood, but for sculpture the net result is that rather than becoming entirely devalued by reproducibility, sculpture becomes lucrative because each copy is a unit on the market. It opens up the possibility of an indefinite revenue from the artist's product, which is only possible because any given unit has no particular value as a uniquely situated object. Duchamp thus laid the bedrock of the contemporary art market that exchanges readily repeatable copies, and he let Warhol take the credit and Hirst take the blame.

⁶ Danto, 'The Artworld' and George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974).

⁷ Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', section II.

In retrospect, it seems a remarkable coincidence that the bulk of the extant copies of *Fountain* – thirteen of them – were produced in the very same year that Warhol staged his Brillo Box exhibition at New York’s Stable Gallery. For Danto, this exhibition in 1964 was the point at which art turned a corner into its post-historical phase where anything, even a mere Brillo Box, could be art. This turning point, which Danto is right to identify as the decisive moment, would not, however, have been possible without Duchamp’s founding gesture in 1917. The thing that Danto does not apprehend is the further cataclysm that, in making perfectly life-like copies of everyday utilitarian objects (indiscernibles, Danto calls them), Warhol was finally turning art into a manufactured commodity. Although Duchamp initially ordered exhibition copies of *Fountain*, his permission for his gallerist to produce copies for sale on the open market signalled the commodification of the work, which occurred in parallel with Warhol’s somewhat more wholesale approach. A work of art that originated in 1917 begins to feel eerily contemporary once we consider that it prefigured the production and dissemination that characterises a great deal of contemporary commercial art. *Fountain* is the charming simulation of a readymade, which was mass-produced by someone other than the artist in order to be dispersed, carrying with it the illusion of uniqueness and the mythology of its creation.

Duchamp was ahead of his time in 1917, but a stroke of genius in 1950 set the ball rolling for an advance that would change art for ever. He unwittingly invented the value industry by first transfiguring an everyday object into art, giving cultural value to that which is purely utilitarian, and second, making that gesture indefinitely repeatable so that economic value could be extracted from the one idea. *Fountain* is a reproduction of a mundane object from the fabric of banality, and at the same time it is anything but that. It is a modern artistic statement, made with an age-old commitment to mimeses, repeated and distributed all over the world. A poet might say that *Fountain*, an imitation of both the real world and itself, turns out to be the first postmodern artwork before modernism had even reached its peak.

The story of modern art is, to a large extent, predicated upon the notion of the readymade, the found object from everyday life transfigured into art. The cultural value of *Fountain* resides in the fact that it was the first such artwork, setting in motion the unfolding history of modern art. In addition, Duchamp compelled philosophers to turn their serious attention to a thoroughgoing redefinition of art, as *Fountain* helped usher in the end of mimesis. And finally, Duchamp was one of the early pioneers of mass-produced sculpture. All these breakthroughs and shockwaves, some of which had immediate effects while others took time

to take hold, are down to *Fountain*'s precise position in the narrative of art: just after impressionism, van Gogh and Monet, and just before Picasso, Dali and modernism. In this sense, its cultural value – construed literally as its value to culture – is derived from its precise position in art history, as the First Cause of an entire phase in history.

The more art there is after *Fountain*, the more valuable *Fountain* becomes because everything after it in some way stems from it or is indebted to it. Cultural value is here established by a mere contingency – Duchamp having a particular idea at a moment in time – without any conjuring of the value industry. Indeed, the value of *Fountain* is a result of the historical fact of its creation and little else besides, since the aesthetic is unremarkable, the concept is so well rehearsed by now that it hardly registers and the myth of its uniqueness is a commonplace misconception. Its influence is so deep and wide that there is nothing the value industry can do to add or subtract value. The value derives, with uniform regularity, from the facts: the fact is that Duchamp was in the right place, at the right time, with the right idea to make something that is indispensable for culture and unequivocally priceless on the market.

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