

Marcel Duchamp's Readymades:

Walking on Infrathin Ice

by Jay D. Russell ©

When asked for a conceptual definition of the term "infrathin," [Marcel Duchamp](#) replied that the notion is impossible to define, "one can only give examples of it:"

--the warmth of a seat (which has just/been left) is infrathin1

--when the tobacco smoke smells also of the/mouth which exhales it, the two odors/marry by infrathin

--2 forms cast in/the same mold (?) differ from each other by an infrathin separative amount.

All "identicals" as identical as they may be (and the more identical they are) move toward this infrathin separative amount.

The infrathin is, in general, a separation, a difference between two things. With this paper I intend to illuminate how Marcel Duchamp's readymades cannot exist as art objects without the viewer--that the viewer and the artist are both participants in making the finished art product. What enables this is the "infrathin."

Marcel Duchamp's work changed dramatically in the period between 1912 and 1918. In Paris, in 1912, he painted "Nude Descending a Staircase," a cubist composition which made Duchamp famous when it caused a scandal at the 1913 Armory Show in New York City. While working on "Nude Descending a Staircase,"¹ Duchamp constantly thought about reduction--reducing the figure to a line.⁴ Later, he came to feel that an artist can use anything to say what he wanted to say. In 1915, he came to New York where he became a member of the New York Dada movement.

Duchamp described the atmosphere in New York at that time as bustling with activity, "but it was limited to a relatively small group and nothing was done very publicly."⁶ For him, the art of this time was "laboratory work."⁷ Duchamp was experimenting, moving away from painting and working on the readymades.

Duchamp was not interested in the physical act of painting, but more interested in recreating ideas in painting. For Duchamp, Dada was not only an extreme protest against the physical side of painting, but a metaphysical attitude.⁹ Duchamp referred to Dada as an invigorating "blank force," which offered artists a way to purge their minds of art historical clichés, a way to negate everything past, present, and future. "Art history does not progress," Duchamp once said.¹⁰ Dadaists did not make art, they made anti-art, nihilistic nonsense, works that attacked art's claim to high culture. It is from this nihilism that the readymades were born.

Philosopher Hector Obalk makes a distinction between the so-called readymades that were assembled or significantly altered and those that were simply acquired and titled. This differentiation produces a list of ten "mere" objects/readymades: a bicycle wheel (1913, Neuilly, France); a bottle rack (1914, Paris); a shovel (1915, Paris); a chimney cowl (1915, New York); a comb (1916, New York); a typewriter cover (1916, New York); a hat-rack (1917, New York); a coat-rack (1917, New York); and a urinal (1917, New York).¹¹

Six of these readymades were given poetic titles, not as literal explanations of the works, but as phrases that defer meaning. For example, the title given to the shovel, "In Advance of the Broken Arm," is intended to confuse the viewer. To use the terminology of theorist Roland Barthes, the title, or signifier of meaning, and the object, the signified meaning, do not add together to produce a sign (an understanding). A complete logical understanding of the shovel is impossible because the title does not "explain" the object--it actually prevents an explanation. In the case of the readymades, the title functions best when it is disfunctional, surrounding the mass produced object in a cloud of mystery.

Duchamp made it clear that "the choice of these 'readymades' was never dictated by aesthetic delectation."¹² The choice was based on a reaction of "visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste."¹³ Duchamp also made a distinction between the notion of taste and the notion of an aesthetic experience, which is comparable to a sexual attraction or religious faith, and can be attained when one abandons taste.¹⁴ To Duchamp, art could be good or bad, but it was still art. Taste is subjective and it is therefore irrelevant to criticize something as being "ugly."

Once the notion of taste has been discarded, we can focus on the aesthetic experience, a personal expression of art (through the art work) by the artist. "In the creative act," Duchamp wrote, "the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions."¹⁵ Through the making process, the artist both consciously and subconsciously makes decisions that affect the outcome of the piece. In the end, there is a difference between what the artist intended and the work's realization, a difference Duchamp would say the artist is not aware of.¹⁶ Therefore, there is a "missing link" in the creative process--the relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.¹⁷ For Duchamp, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone--the viewer attempts to fill in this missing link by deciphering and interpreting the work.

Duchamp separated the notion of taste from the "aesthetic experience" because for him, the aesthetic experience was itself the art, a collaboration of sorts between the artist and viewer. This is made evident

in the readymades, which Hector Obalk states are the "subject matter" of a work of art. The actual work of art lies in the infrathin.

Although Duchamp stated that the infrathin was undefineable, Obalk attempted to define it in a paper given at the College Art Association, in Boston, in February of 1996. Obalk makes three distinctions of the notion of infrathin. In the first notion of infrathin, the term describes an "infinitesimal" thickness--the thickness of an atom for example. The second notion of infrathin characterizes any difference that you can easily imagine but doesn't exist, like the thickness of a shadow.¹⁹ The third and final notion of infrathin qualifies a distance or a difference you cannot perceive, but you can only imagine.²⁰ This last concept of the infrathin is the most important because it exists completely in the viewer's mind.

The infrathin separation is working at its maximum when it distinguishes the same from the same, when it is an indifferent difference.²¹ There is no difference between the bottle rack selected by Duchamp and every other bottle rack. Then again, there is a difference if Duchamp selects one bottle rack, and the viewer subsequently considers that bottle rack as a work of art. The infrathin artwork is not the bottle rack itself, but the viewer's contemplation of the bottle rack as art.

Duchamp was very careful about how he constructed the idea of the readymades. He limited their "production" to only a few every year between 1913 and 1917, because if more readymades would have been produced, the weaker the infrathin would have become--the more objects we view as "readymades," the less we view as "art." Duchamp also places the viewer in a situation where making a choice is almost impossible. To reject the readymades is to revert to one's standards of taste, and to accept them as works of art is to revoke art's separate and special status, oppositional to mass produced objects. Duchamp was well aware that in the end, history decides the virtues of an artwork, and he rigged the argument so that history cannot decide.

The readymades themselves are not the art, the debate about them is. Without the viewer, the readymades do not exist as art objects, but revert back to their previous lives as functional industrial objects. The infrathin exists most potently in the viewer's mind, because ultimately, that's where the difference between a readymade and its "ordinary" counterpart is. This is not only putting art in the service of the mind, but also putting the mind in the service of Duchamp's art.

Endnotes

1. Marcel Duchamp, *Marcel Duchamp, Notes*, Paul Matisse, ed (Boston:G.K. Hall & Co., 1983).
2. Duchamp.
3. Duchamp.

4. Marcel Duchamp, "The Great Trouble with Art in This Country," *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, ed. (New York:Oxford University Press, 1973), 124.
5. Duchamp, "The Great Trouble with Art in This Country," 124.
6. Duchamp, "The Great Trouble with Art in This Country," 123.
7. Duchamp, "The Great Trouble with Art in This Country," 123.
8. Duchamp, "The Great Trouble with Art in This Country," 125.
9. Duchamp, "The Great Trouble with Art in This Country," 125.
10. Bonnie Clearwater, ed, *West Coast Duchamp* (Miami Beach, Florida:Grassfield Press, Inc, 1991), 110.
11. Hector Obalk, paper on readymades, given at the College Art Association, Boston, Massachusetts, February 1996, 2.
12. Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of 'Readymades'," *Salt Seller:The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, ed (New York:Oxford University Press, 1973), 141.
13. Duchamp, "Apropos of 'Readymades'," 141.
14. Clearwater, ed, 107.
15. Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," *Salt Seller:The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, ed (New York:Oxford University Press, 1973), 139.
16. Duchamp, "The Creative Act," 139.
17. Duchamp, "The Creative Act," 139.
18. Obalk, 6.
19. Obalk, 6.
20. Obalk, 6.
21. Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism:On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade* (Minneapolis:University of Minnesota Press,1991), 160.

22. de Duve, 161.

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