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Can One Make Works that Are Not Works of Art?

Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* is a notorious yet vitally significant readymade art as a urinal produced in 1917. As soon as this work was submitted to the American Society of Independent Artists for an exhibition under the name "Richard Mutt," it received harsh criticism because of its impact on the traditional understanding of art. Indeed, in *Fountain*, Marcel Duchamp renounces the conventional aesthetical basis of formalist art by employing the vulgar urinal as the object and eliminating his role in making arts. Furthermore, Marcel Duchamp uses the public reaction towards *Fountain* to challenge that the standard of art might not solely rely on the object of depiction itself but the idea expressed by the art. Duchamp's readymade remains influential in the later development of art, as in "Art after Philosophy," Joseph Kosuth further alleges art as a conceptual idea independent of the aesthetic components.

First and foremost, the single object in Duchamp's *Fountain* is a urinal from the bathroom of a New York showroom. If *Fountain* should be categorized as a sculpture, its predecessors include *Venus de Milo* and Matisse's *Reclining Nude II*. Although Matisse's exotic nude with distorted chests and bottom is controversial compared with the noble and graceful Greek goddess, Duchamp's urinal as a fountain from the filthy bathroom in New York is one of the most immortal and vulgar objects. Traditionally, artworks are regarded as the most divine creation for the sake of pure aesthetic enjoyment. For example, viewers can be fascinated by the golden ratio of the torso and upper body of *Venus de Milo* or shocked by the exotic abstraction of the "primitive" body from Matisse. However, Duchamp's urinal not only gives viewers no sensational joy but may invoke some physical sickness, since as a signifier, a urinal will put the

audience in the bathroom with foul smells and dirty substances. Besides, contradicting the common uselessness of art, Duchamp's urinal has an actual function, one of the grossest functions — collecting human wastes. As Duchamp once proposes to “use a Rembrandt as an ironing board” (Duchamp: 141), he fulfills his promise by finding a sculpture as a urination device. Thus, Duchamp successfully drags the divine artworks from the unreachable lofty heaven of aesthetics to the grunge bathroom to challenge what can be depicted in art.

Second, as the name readymade suggests, Duchamp challenges the originality of art by using existing objects. Conventionally, artists are differentiated from others by distinguishing art-making skills, including painting, sculpturing, or designing. Through long years of training and practicing, artists aim to create original art to represent the high point of their skills. Artists like Leonardo de Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo have been admired for ages because of their extraordinary skills in art-making. However, in *Fountain* and other readymades, Duchamp completely removes his role in artmaking. The urinal in *Fountain* is made by the New York J. L. Mott Iron Works. The only work done by Duchamp is rotating the urinal by ninety degrees so that it resembles the standard fountain appearance and signing a fictitious name, “R. Mutt.” Notice that instead of using his noble name “Marcel Duchamp,” which stands for fame and authority since he was the chair of the hanging committee for the exhibition, he amusingly uses a first name as a rich man in slang and a last name as a popular cartoon character. Therefore, *Fountain* becomes an anonymous art anyone can make without any artistic training. By removing originality from art, Duchamp directly asks how to define artists and art, and can we find “works of art without an artist to make them?” (Duchamp:139). If *Fountain* can be equated with *The Pietà*, can the generic R. Mutt be equated with Michelangelo in art?

Moreover, Duchamp challenges the standards on how to judge art from success to failure. Based on the previous discussion on the complete lack of aesthetics and originality in *Fountain*, it seems that this work is an utter failure and might not be counted as an art at all. Indeed, this work received harsh criticism along with its submission to the exhibition. Nevertheless, the controversy created by *Fountain* and its subsequent challenges on the traditional artistic values are vitally significant. *Fountain* unprecedentedly questions what can be defined as art, who can be identified as artists, and what should be valued in art. While the materialistic nature of *Fountain* is a urinal from a bathroom in New York, through the nomination of the unanimous artist R. Mutt, it becomes an essential artwork that shakes the academy of art. Thus, the aesthetics of the depicted object is irrelevant to the value of the art. As Duchamp stated himself, “based on a reaction of visual difference, a total absence of good or bad taste, a complete anesthesia” (Duchamp: 141). Then, when the aesthetic evaluation of art is no longer valid illustrated by *Fountain*, how should one recognize the significance of painting in general?

Duchamp’s readymade has a far-reaching influence on the modern interpretation of art. In “Art after Philosophy,” Joseph Kosuth proposes an answer that art should be conceptualized as an “analytical proposition,” just like mathematics and science. Influenced by Duchamp, Kosuth first rejects a purely aesthetic judgment of art in Formalist art. Specifically, he recognizes art as an analytic proposition that questions the nature of art and elaborates on how to enrich the content of art. Like how the study of mathematics studies the propositions implied by a set of axioms but does directly not relate to any applications, Kosuth claims that art should also concern conceptual propositions that are not confined by the materialistic nature of presentations. Thus, the value of art depends on how “art lives through influencing other art, not by existing as the physical residue of an artist’s ideas” (Kosuth: 856). Thus, Kosuth’s argument recognizes that

Fountain is valuable because it expresses Duchamp's revolutionary proposition that anyone can make art with anything. Art only becomes art after being nominated by the artist. Even contemporarily, the influence of Kosuth's recognition of art as a provocative idea is visible in many forms of art. For example, Serbian conceptual and performance artist Marina Abramović revolutionized performance art by freeing the participation of the audience and the moral limitation of the body to investigate issues related to ethics and feminism. Her most famous performance was *Rhythm 0* in 1974, in which she allowed the audience to do everything to her body with the 72 objects she provided on a table, including feather, grape, or even a loaded gun. By completely lifting the moral limitation, Abramović further explores the question asked by Duchamp in *Fountain* sixty years ago — "Can one make works that are not works of art?" (Duchamp: 140).