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# Primary Text

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## Readymade or Handmade?

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I

In the narratives of twentieth-century art history, it is as if the composure of "Fine Art" has been disturbed by rude interruptions from unusual objects "in the gallery." Rather than submitting to aesthetic judgment, the objects promise, or threaten, to make such judgment impossible, forestalling it through an argument that replays so completely and assertively the conditions of their own objecthood as sufficient reason for inclusion in the category of "work of art." For the surrealists and their concern with ethnographic collections, and for the conceptualists whose installations come after Duchamp's unassisted readymades, the effect of the ensuing discourse produced speculative shifts in thinking about the roles of the author, curator, spectator, the institution of the academy and its publications, and the institution of the gallery itself. The question of finding satisfying limits to what may be included as art had modified the authority of these terms, and has produced sensitivity around other terms that may previously have been closely associated with the production of art.

This exhibition is designed to investigate anxiety around the term "craft" when it is used in relation to objects being presented as "art," even though many artists strategically include references to craft when making their work. On being presented as commodity, "the work of art" is usually

posed in a nonrelational position of absolute difference to the “work of craft.” In spite of this, boundaries remain problematic; the inclusion of methods of production associated with “craft” as a device in “art” practice may signal more extensive problems with boundaries elsewhere. The question is not to decide whether an activity associated with craft can produce a work of art, raising distinctions that are notoriously fraught with difficulty, but to view this hybridization as a creative possibility. The repositioning of craft as art has, nevertheless, aesthetic concerns.

R. G. Collingwood considers the difficulties of distinction between craft and art in his text *The Principles of Art*. He defines the aim of the craft worker by referring to the “condition” of the customer. This raises the instrumental position of the object in the transaction between the craft producer and the customer’s desires:

The cobbler or carpenter or weaver is not simply trying to produce shoes or carts or cloth ... they are not ends to him, but means to the end of supplying a specific demand. What he is really aiming at is the production of a certain state of mind in his customers, the state of mind of having these demands satisfied ... [his products] are all ways of bringing human beings into certain desired conditions.<sup>1</sup>

Collingwood is careful not to rest his distinction directly on the use-value of craft objects: condition is a state of mind subject to certain desires, which the craftsman supplies. While he sees that his definition of craft production could be an explanation of the need for artists’ production, it is the reflexive uncertainty about the desired condition that subtends demand for art

that destabilizes the relation of supplying a specific demand to certain desire.

When positioning a “work of craft,” identified with its specific demand, as a “work of art,” there are two considerations: in the first instance the object itself is placed in the gallery in a gesture close to that of the unassisted readymade; in the second instance, which “Craft” investigates, the object relates to the artist’s gesture not only through installation, but through how it has been made, even if the artist did not directly make the object. Marcel Duchamp makes a distinction in conversation with Pierre Cabanne; asked if a practical piece of woodwork he had made was his last readymade, Duchamp replies: “It’s not a readymade it’s a handmade!”<sup>2</sup> These were extreme poles: in between, Duchamp investigated every nuance of this relation, observing:

African spoons were nothing at the time when they were made, they were simply functional; later they became beautiful things, “works of art.”<sup>3</sup>

To position an ordinary object as a work of art, Duchamp implies, raises a question about qualifications. The readymade or the handmade, displayed in the gallery, creates comparisons: a thing made to satisfy “specific demand” is being brought into relation with painting or sculpture, intended for the uncertain concerns of looking and its contingent activities. What demand will the viewer now conceive for the object on display? Thierry de Duve observes the readymade’s new use: “to make the convention explicit according to which works of art are shown in order to be judged as such.”<sup>4</sup> He makes a further distinction:

“readymades,” generally, in the plural, could be assisted and unassisted, qualified with text or other modification, or remain as imaginary projects, while the singular “readymade” has a more specific meaning. This refers to the capacity of the ordinary object, “otherwise undistinguishable from its nonartistic counterpart,” and normally void of associations with art, to become the readymade, translated to the consideration “This is art.” Readymades are less pure: positioned in the gallery, they not only invoke “the convention,” but a range of comparisons and judgments of taste, and, they could be handmade.

The readymade and the works that include handmaking have different contractual bases. In the case of the readymade, de Duve emphasizes the importance of the terms laid down by Duchamp for the encounter between the artist and the object-to-become-art. These already eliminate the presupposition that the artist has had any part in making that object. “Along with this presupposition of making goes the whole valorization of craft, everything that, legislating over the beautifully executed work, demands that the object be invested with technical know-how; all this disappears into *le refrain en durée*, the hackneyed formula, an ideological prejudice.”<sup>15</sup> The readymade asserts its difference with the force of a paradigm case. Although it contributed by its ordinary presence the grounds on which it could be judged as art, those grounds must strictly limit repetitions.

Paradigm status does not evade the readymade’s capacity to be “a beautiful thing,” but it does clarify and delineate possible grounds for that judgment. Kant says that considerations of utility or perfection

require “an objective internal finality,” the concept of which may be regarded as the ground of the possibility of the object. If the viewer grasps this finality, seeing the object as either externally well constructed to “a definite end” or “perfect” according to a preconceived internal fitness, it runs counter to immediacy of response. Only a “mere formal finality, i.e. a finality apart from an end” can be found in the experience Kant terms “delight,” which is the basis for the judgment of beauty.<sup>6</sup> Moving the readymade to the gallery splits the everyday functional object from its internal finality (its specific demand), allowing only the possibility of a paradoxical re-encounter, one that locks the viewer into “immediate response” and the question of delight.

Kant foresees this contradiction, explaining it as a mis-recognition. Something could be made with an internal finality, but, because of changed position, or unfamiliarity, the viewer does not see this: the object appears “devoid of an end.” So “The subject feels itself quite at home in its efforts to grasp a given form in the imagination but no perfection of any object.” This causes a disparity: the object may have a finality, but if the subject does not see that finality, then the same object may be a source of delight, esteemed as beautiful. Kant was optimistic that mistakes would be corrected later by a critic who knew of the dependence of the object’s beauty on an “internal finality.” Nevertheless, a space for delay occurs where judgment itself is estranged from its proper objects. Kant’s own example<sup>7</sup> of mis-recognition may be based in contemporary debates about landscape gardening: the play of formal planting and wilderness. He imagines himself in a forest, coming to some

grass ringed by trees. A subjective aesthetic judgment of the space's formality is possible only if he cannot imagine that it has an end. He suggests, rather inconclusively, that aesthetic pleasure could be undone if it was realized that being used for country dancing could have caused its formality.

Objects displayed in an ethnographic collection may not be positioned for the same reasons as the readymade, or the handmade, but there are similarities in their reception that illustrate a value for this disparity of use and delight. In his essay "The Use Value of the Impossible," Denis Hollier describes Georges Bataille's fascination for an exhibition of medals<sup>9</sup> as perverse because it is a love which exercises itself through an injunction against use, so that the coins are held at once "on display and in reserve." This effect comes about through a transposition: "Currency takes leave of the stock exchange to be recycled, two blocks away, on the Rue de Richelieu, at the Bibliothèque Nationale." The protocols of the environment in which the medals are on display enforce their uselessness and idleness. Hollier observes a sense of leisure, as if the things removed from their usual world of work could be on holiday, enjoying themselves. They are there to be seen, but away from the place that guarantees their use as tokens, arranged in another place for another kind of scrutiny.

Pleasure in the coins is compared to the feelings of Molière's miser, Harpagon, who "cannot stand expenditure," and keeps his money only to look at it. Out of exchange, "the lackeys of exchange value" are now trapped in an economy of the lost opportunity, cut off from the use they may have in "bringing human beings into certain desired conditions," nevertheless a source of

pleasure and value. Duchamp plays on the same contradiction in his "Tzanck Cheque," and describes the exchange as follows:

I asked [Tzanck] how much I owed, and then did the cheque entirely by hand. I took a long time doing the little letters, to do something which would look printed—it wasn't a small cheque. And I bought it back twenty years later, for a lot of more than it says it's worth! Afterwards I gave it to Matta, unless I sold it to him. I no longer remember. Money was always over my head.<sup>9</sup>

Duchamp has created a failure: he needs money, he makes it by hand, as close a resemblance as he can, but it cannot be spent, only looked at. Although the check fails as a reproduction, it can also be seen as a reproduction that has not managed to fail, its value held in a chain of deferrals as it operates its only parody of market exchange. This dubious object, because of its knowing deceit (or conceit) on use-value, may be beautiful. Hollier says that this is an aesthetic "which is above all an anti-aesthetic of the un-transposable (a resistance to aesthetic translation)." What has been staged in the negotiation of the check is a use-value that could not be consumed, in Baudrillard's phrase, "a vacillation beyond satisfaction"<sup>10</sup>; but also a deliberate case of the mistake that Kant foresaw.

This could give rise to dissatisfaction. In "Craft" not only are functional objects on holiday in the gallery, but the object that looks as if it should work has been modified so it cannot supply the specific demand it appears to offer to fulfill. I am thinking of the chair by Neil Cummings, which appears substantially made of wood,

but only of veneer; too fragile to sit upon; David Cheeseman's glass broom; Roy Voss's miniature wooden radiator; Hadrian Pigott's impossible plumbing. Their practical disfunctions open up delightful speculations about their use and exchange. Cummings's chair is a remake of a Gerrit Rietveld prototype designed for mass production but never commercially produced. Rietveld had already incorporated the contradiction that makes the chair un-transposable, caught in the disparity of being a chair and being a sculpture. The chair, like the check, fails to enter into the scenarios of exchange either as an industrialized utility item or as a work of art, but succeeds as a handmade "in-between." Cummings's chair luxuriates in its own repose. The delicate reconstruction awaits the deferrals of its own exchange and refers to those of Rietveld's prototype.

Like Collingwood's craftsman, the artists in "Craft" are sensitive to the transaction with the consumer. The viewer can imagine being the user: walking in Baseman's enormous shoes; trying to put on Naomi Dines's leather strapwork; reading the dazzling text of Ward's mirrors. These objects' disfunction on display is disavowed by the spectator through research that certifies the solidity of their presence but evades, in the processes of imaginative involvement, any recognition of internal finality. Lucy Byatt's drawing of cloth on the wall offers a metaphor for the deceptions entailed here: as in the story of Parrhasius, her cloth implies that something lies behind, or, distracts attention from the fact that there is nothing there at all. As Kant says, this research in suspense of recognition of "finality" feels familiar; and has the spontaneity of delight. However, handmaking allows for further elaborations,

like the elongated neck on Koushna Navabi's sweater; the exaggerated oily surfaces of Simon Linke's painted typography, or the brilliant blue-green watercolor of Andrea Wilkinson's graph paper. Specialized techniques more intimately propose "specific demand," expanding the imaginary gestural space of the work. Materials themselves have connotations here: the hair of Lucy Byatt's thread; the shredded jeans that make Ben Hall's rag rugs; the broken shards of Aiga Muller's mosaics, trapping inside them the objects they depict.

## 2

In a formulation that could have been echoed by Collingwood, Marx says that use-value "invariably [owes its] existence to a special productive activity, exercised with a definite aim, an activity that appropriates particular nature-given materials to particular human wants".<sup>11</sup> These wants are frankly established in the body, and Marx states that their satisfaction allows for "all material exchanges between man and Nature, and are basic to life itself." Functional objects sited in the museum as aesthetic objects introduce speculation about the body and its desires as a central concern of the museal imaginary.

Parodying a critic of his work Marx writes: "How very 'skilful' is this 'anatomico-physical method' of Political Economy, which, 'indeed', converts a mere desire 'after all' into a source of value."<sup>12</sup> This value is not the "plain, homely bodily form" of use-value, which permits liaison between the human body and nature, nor is it the residual value of spent labor. Exchange has its own bodily imagery that enables commodities to speak and relate among themselves, albeit in a ghostly kind of communication. Marx writes of this value:

The reality of the value of commodities differs in this respect from Dame Quickly, that we don't know "where to have it".

The value of commodities is the very opposite of the coarse materiality of their substance, not an atom of matter enters into its composition.<sup>13</sup>

The element of farce offsets Marx's anxiety about transcendence implied by opposing "the value of commodities" to "coarse substance." The immaterial suggests spectrality, an uneasy connotation for Marx. He uses it to speak of the new value that emerges between the production of an object and its presentation for exchange. He offers the instance of wood, transformed by the work of a carpenter into a table, and then presented as a commodity. In this shift, from use to display, a "very trivial" object may become "very queer." It can now articulate itself as a social relation, and evolve "grotesque ideas" from its wooden brain.

Haim Steinbach says that his use of objects in the gallery is inflected by his experience of shopping: "locating one's desire" by "taking pleasure in objects and commodities, which includes what we call works of art." Steinbach reiterates Marx's problem about exchange value by placing objects in the gallery in order to create an elision of possible uses: the objects, as he positions them, lose their sense of distinction between "consumer objects/fetish objects/art objects." Steinbach carefully arranges his objects to analyze the effects of their display. This reflexivity produces a preoccupation about our own relation to things on display, a "shift of attention"; looking at "beautiful seductive objects," "there is a stronger sense

of being complicitous with the production of desire . . . than being positioned somewhere outside it. In this sense, the idea of criticality in art is also changing."<sup>14</sup> Steinbach positions his works as sculpture through the formality of the shelves, whose beautiful geometry and precise construction echo concerns of modernist sculpture. But the sculpture is also a beautifully constructed shelf supporting objects, handmade or readymade, whose functional and decorative possibilities suggest the taxonomy of a contemporary ethnography.

In comparison with the "certain desired condition" of Collingwood's customer—satisfied by shoes, clothes, transport—there is a lack of differentiation in Steinbach's account of desire for commodities that allows the customer to define the object's function, and, by implication, how that function may liaise between the customer and nature. Gilles Deleuze offers an analogy which aptly describes this more diffuse relation of the object's presence to the perceptions of the viewer of these objects: "The signs by which an animal senses the presence of water do not resemble the elements which its thirsty organism lacks."

We are made of contracted water, earth, light and air—not merely prior to the recognition or representation of these, but prior to their being sensed. Every organism in its receptive and perceptual elements, but also in its viscera, is a sum of contractions, of retentions, and expectations . . . Need is the manner in which the future appears, as the organic form of expectation.<sup>15</sup>

Deleuze's imaginary of conditions is one of the flows and needs in which the customer

discovers the satisfactions its organism demands from abstracted signs, on the basis of an immediacy of desiring sensory experience and a continual on/off of connection/disconnection, fullness/lack. What can “criticality in art” apply to this description of condition and demand?

Marx raises the same question of qualifications as Duchamp in relation to the African spoons: how can something whose material and making are intended for use convert to something not to be used but accumulated or exchanged? Deprived of their use-value in the gallery, the spoon bodies exist as an empty support for other values that enable the spoons to move in different kinds of ways from those of their practical beginnings. That movement is once again inflected when the artist intervenes not only to position the spoon, but to remake it. I am thinking here of Giacometti’s version of an African spoon: *Spoon Woman* of 1926, an object shaped with an upward bulge in the hollow of the spoon to undermine its imaginary of spoon-use. The artist’s second intervention, so the object both proclaims itself as intruder in the gallery, but is also resculpted to “transcend” the ordinary use of the spoon, provides a further articulation of how the commodity may be “queer.”

### 3

The readymade and the handmade remain different and the works in “Craft,” with the limit-case exceptions of Richard Wentworth’s *Title Resistant* and *Wreath*, are handmades. The readymade, as chosen and not made, asserts its difference through the structure of illusion: “This object cannot be negated because it is already in itself, in its positivity, nothing but an embodiment of negativity.”

The illusion of the readymade can persist only in an intermediate state, placed in the gallery. If it appears in its place in the world, it changes back into an everyday object. Handmades, and readymades, do not establish the grounds for their aesthetic judgment by the same assertion, because handmades are not paradigms, and retain ambivalence about “the convention” on judgment because they also retain ambivalence about perfection to some end. The negations of the readymade seem alien to the presence of the handmade. Duchamp’s handmade was a wooden awning that belonged to a specific place: his house by the sea. It performed a specific demand: shelter from sun and wind. Nevertheless, it could opportunistically be subject to the play of deferral—“It was made a few years ago”; it was never valuable—“It may not have lasted this winter”; but, if somebody was interested in it, it could still enter the chain of reproduction—“I’ll send you postcards and let you know.”<sup>16</sup> This is the uncertain structure, the vulnerability about use and exchange, value, and judgment, played out by and through the handmade adjustments to the assisted readymades.

If the readymade already contained the absolute certainty that its making was a matter of indifference, the handmade may allow its origins in the artist’s decision about process to show. However this making is not invested with the modernist play of trace and authorial presence. In craft, “handmade” is an ambivalent qualification of value, because it remains subject to tradition, codes of production, and the requirements of mechanical interventions. Modernism, at least rhetorically, would not allow value for such dispersed origins in the marks of authorship,

in spite of a desire to incorporate technical developments.

Ambivalence about the nostalgic and auratic qualities of the handmade is carefully analyzed in the handmade impurities of Duchamp's readymades. In the series of boxes, begun in 1934 and continuing after he died (the last few examples signed by his widow, Teeny), he demonstrates his acute awareness of the craft values of printing and editioning. Color and black and white, hand-tinted or color-printed, halftone or collotype, photo or autographic mark, matt or varnished, Duchamp compares the intricate codings of such choices in his handmade boxes. Original and reproduction are designated through various forms of authentication. In the case of *The Green Box*, there were 300 copies, of which the first twenty were deluxe editions, made by Duchamp himself. If the box's reproductions and their later incarnations as signed, printed readymades disguised the gesture of the hand, they also used it, reproduced it, and redeployed it (in craft techniques such as cutting out, masking, stenciling, pochoir).<sup>17</sup>

When a commodity is displayed as art, its origins in use are not mentioned in order to privilege aesthetic judgment. Hollier observes: "Like money, beauty has no smell. All that is behind us. Aesthetic arrivisme demands it. No art-lover will ever ask what the objects did before they cost so much money. No art-lover will ever ask why they were never seen before they were put on show." This exclusion renders an imaginary gestural space of using and making. The activities surrounding the objects could never be pictured vividly enough for the ethnographer; display should include written

and photographed documentation. The user was not the viewer in this case, and this must be established as a matter of fact. For the aesthete, the original use of a coin, or a strap, or the vase's handle was better left to the imagination.

Duchamp's boxes are meant to be opened. In the gallery, the box's contents are displayed behind the glass. The box exists as a document, a collection of miniature reproductions of Duchamp's work, an almost sentimental "keeping together" of mementoes, with notes and explanations. As a work of art, it is offered for aesthetic appraisal. As an archival tool, it is a compact "ethnography" of the artist Duchamp. Duchamp exemplifies this duality in his "small glass": the object on display is a tool, designed for use in the gallery, which converts aesthetic contemplation into practical use. Abstracting the complicity of the user/viewer, the work has the title/instruction: "To Be Looked At (From the Other Side of the Glass) With One Eye, Close To, for Almost an Hour," already a doubling of identity. The work contains a framed sheet of glass with a magnifying lens embedded in its surface. Duchamp orchestrates a comparison of roles: the unsuspecting customer, shifting toward the glass to view the work of art, and an "oculist witness" following instructions: waiting behind the glass which now functions as a speculum of the gallery. Thierry de Duve notes the consequences of looking:

My eye riveted to the magnifying glass  
... The revelation takes place when  
by chance another visitor passes who  
appears to me like a homunculus, upside  
down and in my former place, since I was

initially on the side of the glass where the title/instruction sheet was to be read ... Between the two of us the work was nothing but the instrument of this encounter. But since he occupied the place where I was, it was also with myself that I had this missed rendezvous to which I arrived late, and it is with himself that he will have, or that he already has, a rendezvous, with all kinds of delays.<sup>18</sup>

Operating at the limits of desire, another doubling or crossing has taken place. However the vivid revelation is given the terms of a monstrosity, not only the homunculus, but “the missed encounter;” the Freudian/Lacanian picture of a nearly seen, but held-as-impossible sight where only indications remain of the object whose horror cannot be fixed. The scholar of Duchamp submits to the rule of Duchamp’s lens. In this posture of expectancy he becomes aware of the mordant sensation that he occupies the place of the phantasmatic body of Duchamp himself.

In “Craft,” the repetitive world of commodity exchange with its tedium of equivalences can be reviewed through failed values: vacillation, dependency, farce, complicity, deceit, appropriation, counterfeit, which, once incorporated into the handmade, refuse to fail. Judgment is pending while the objects in the gallery threaten to put an end to the possibility of delight by producing the possibility of horror. Hollier remarks that monstrosity fascinated Bataille and formed the basis of his aesthetic debate with the ethnographers. For the ethnographers, the aesthetes’ interest in beauty as something rare was a perverse love of the abnormal statistic, and, in this sense, beauty was

itself a monstrosity. For Bataille and his interest in the medals, beauty was itself a commonplace that marked the lack of place of the monstrous: “It was for want of that impossible copy of what was ugly that beauty emerges.” The handmades in “Craft” are mischievous, with their doublings and displacements of lack of use, but this forms a basis for a judgment not about perfection, but about beauty. Not Kant’s “free beauty;” but a paradoxical beauty that, through its limitations and deferrals, produces and represses this latent monstrosity. It is the failure to “wrap up” beauty in the decisive act of recognition and consumption that maintains the possibility of delight.

## Notes

- 1 R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 18.
- 2 P. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), p. 105.
- 3 P. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 70.
- 4 T. de Duve, “Critique of Pure Modernism,” in M. Buskirk and M. Nixon (eds.), *The Duchamp Effect* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 103.
- 5 T. de Duve, “Critique of Pure Modernism,” in *The Duchamp Effect*, p. 104.
- 6 I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 69.
- 7 I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, p. 70.
- 8 D. Hollier, *The Use Value of the Impossible*, trans. L. Ollman, in *October* 60: 3–23.
- 9 P. Cabanne, *Dialogues*, p. 63.
- 10 J. Baudrillard, “Desire in Exchange Value,” in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. C. Levin (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1981), p. 207.
- 11 K. Marx, *Capital*, trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974 [1883]).

- 12** K. Marx, *Capital*, p. 199.
- 13** K. Marx, *Capital*, pp. 50, 54.
- 14** H. Steinbach, remarks in discussion reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. C. Harrison and P. Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 1081.
- 15** G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton (London: Athlone Press, 1994), p. 73.
- 16** P. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 105.
- 17** See S. Maharaj, “Typotranslating the Green Box,” in M. Buskirk and M. Nixon (eds.), *The Duchamp Effect*, pp. 61–91, for an account of correspondence about typography between M. Duchamp and R. Hamilton.
- 18** T. de Duve, “Critique of Pure Modernism” in *The Duchamp Effect*, p. 110.