



Readymade Century

DIETER DANIELS
SPECTOR BOOKS

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“I’m not at all sure that the concept of the ready-made isn’t the most important single idea to come out of my work.” (Marcel Duchamp 1961)*

* Interview Kuh 1961, p. 92.

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* part I and II may be read in any sequence, which may cause smaller repetitions



Display of books on the topics of the Readymade and the Large Glass at the museum bookshop for the exhibition Marcel Duchamp: La Peinture, même, Centre Pompidou, Paris, September 24, 2014–January 5, 2015.

I. READYMADE INDEX¹

- 1 In the following, the spelling “ready-made” is used for the adjective outside of an art context, while “readymade” designates the “already made” works by Duchamp and other artists. Marcel Duchamp himself used various spellings in texts on his works and concepts. For a detailed analysis, see André Gervais, “Note sur le terme Readymade (ou ready-made),” in: *Étant donné Marcel Duchamp*, N° 1, premier semestre, 1999, pp. 118–121. Titles of works given by Marcel Duchamp are in italics with quotation marks (e.g. “Pharmacy” while descriptive designations are in italics only (e.g. *Bottle Dryer*).

What body of work do we talk about when we discuss “the readymades” of Marcel Duchamp?

While literature on the topic of the readymade has grown immensely, it still does not offer a direct answer to the simple question of to what extent and exact characteristics were Duchamp’s activities. There is neither an established list of readymades, an agreed account of their genesis, nor a satisfyingly precise definition. Even the 2014–2017 centennial did not bring us an encyclopedia or a retrospective of the readymade.

This book will not overcome those deficits, nor could it hope to do so. Instead, my suggestion is to think about possible reasons for this vagueness of the readymade concept. Maybe there were structural motives in Duchamp’s activities that continually prevent any fixed reading of this body of work?

As early as 1935, in one of the first art-theoretical texts on Duchamp ever, André Breton wrote with an eye on the artist of the readymades: “It will be of great interest to one day determine the full scope of his activities, each so radically unexpected, and in that sense to try and uncover the law of their development.”²

This suggestion of a specifically inherent logic to the readymade’s creation, which would define both its

- 2 André Breton, “Phare de la mariée,” in: *Minotaure*, N° 6, winter 1934 / 35, p. 46. (“Il sera de tout intérêt d’aborder un jour la portée de ses démarches, toujours rigoureusement inattendues, en ce sens, de tenter de dégager la loi de leur progression.”)

extent and its delimitations, has hardly been followed at all. Instead, an irritating diversity of interpretations proliferates in the secondary literature, where the most various fields of knowledge are applied to the ready-made—non-Euclidean geometry, history of science, institutional theory of art, etc.

All of these interpretations share the assumption that we know what we talk about when we discuss “the readymades” of Marcel Duchamp. But that is not the case. Their plural masks ever new combinations that are often willfully adapted to the thesis at hand. The “full scope,” as Breton saw it, or even the “law of their development,” is not tackled in the attempts.

The mostly overlooked, very simple questions regarding the genesis, the extent, and the commonalities of “the readymades” will form the center of the next chapter. Our *Readymade Index* is not an inventory of readymades, and it does not aim to compensate for the lack of a catalogue raisonné. Instead, we will explore the conditions for the possibility (or impossibility) of such a catalog.³ In contrast to the closed nature of a catalogue raisonné, an index can describe a fluid state, as demonstrated for example by the volatility of stock indexes.

3 Cf. the unfinished “catalogue raisonné of the readymades” undertaken between 1999 and 2006 in: *Étant donné Marcel Duchamp*, N° 1, 3, 5, 6, 7.

READYMADE CHRONOLOGY: WHEN DID THE “READYMADE CENTURY” BEGIN?

Can we define a certain moment that marks the inception of the readymade project? Can we perhaps denominate a prototypical “first readymade”? Various works and occasions from the period between 1913 and 1917 seem to offer themselves for the nomination:

Bicycle Wheel, Paris 1913: Against this, we can argue that the object was created and put together from two separate parts (wheel and stool), so in fact, it is a montage, and not an already made object chosen by the artist. Accordingly, it is not classified as a readymade by Duchamp in his *Boîte-en-valise*. In later interviews he always stressed that when he first mounted the *Bicycle Wheel* in his studio, it had no connection to the term readymade, which he would only hear later in the U.S.: “The word did not exist—the thought did not exist...”⁴

Bottle Dryer, Paris 1914: Here we have Duchamp’s first unaltered object. He bought it in the Bazar de l’Hôtel de Ville department store in Paris with the idea of installing it in his studio. In 1914, it bore no signature and no title, and the term readymade had not yet been

4 Duchamp in a television interview from 1966; <https://youtu.be/pHeNrmBPKKQ>. Cf. similar statements by Duchamp in: Interview Charbonnier 1960–61, and interview Cabanne 1967, p. 51.

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This book explores the readymades of Marcel Duchamp from different perspectives in three parts: In the “Ready-made Index,” we study the origins and consistency of Duchamp’s concept during the first 50 years of the ‘Readymade Century’ from 1914 to 1964. In the second part, “Readymade Exposition,” we follow the reception history of that concept, which still continues long after Duchamp’s death. A hinge between these two halves of the ‘Readymade Century’ is offered by Duchamp’s edition of his readymades as multiples, as well as Andy Warhol’s exhibition of his Brillo Boxes. Simultaneously yet independently, these two events in 1964 mark a turning point midway through the ‘Readymade Century.’ They still have a direct impact on today’s artistic practices of the “already made,” even on artists that may not see themselves in the tradition of Duchamp’s readymades. The development and expansion of the readymade concept is discussed in the book’s epilog, “Readymade Contemporary.”



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