The readymade is everywhere in the world (for the readymade can be made of anything); the readymade is nowhere in the world. This is the paradox of the readymade: it does not exist in the world as art until after the artist has named it. In this sense it can be argued that there is no such thing as a readymade. It only comes into being through the will and intention of the artist. The readymade may live unnamed in the world for years but it does not exist in the world as art until the artist has intentionally named it (or made it). As Marcel Duchamp observes,

“It’s not the visual aspect of the readymade that matters, it’s simply that fact that it exists... Visuality is no longer the question: the readymade is no longer visible, so to speak. It is completely grey matter. It is no longer retinal.”1

The readymade is (initially) a concept of the brain and not of the eye. It is a commodity made by man living in the world made ready for identification as art ‘already made’ by the recognition of the artist of its exchange value - the object as transitory metonym which “stands in” for another place of being through a change of name or purpose. It is the intention of the artist to impose an (alternate) order on the object, an order in which the readymade questions aesthetic criteria and categories such as taste, authorship and
intentionality. As Dr Rex Butler notes, “The work is not simply intended - which is an obvious fact about any work of art - but about an intention that has come to replace, while entirely reproducing, that which is the very embodiment of the contingent and unpredictable.”2

Marcel Duchamp

*Bicycle wheel* (detail) (with Dr Marcus Bunyan)

1913 reconstructed 1964

Painted wooden stool and bicycle wheel

Stool: 50.4 cm (h.); wheel: 64.8 cm (diam.); overall: 126.5 cm (h.)

Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Photo: © Joyce Evans
According to Thierry de Duve, the choosing of the object is accompanied by three other acts: naming the object, signing it and devising some original presentation for it. There are the so-called unassisted readymades (such as Duchamp’s *Bottle dryer*, 1914 reconstructed 1964) and there are also plain, aided, sick, unhappy, reciprocal and semi-readymades. In reality no readymade is unassisted as all are called into being by the mind of the artist. But the concept of the readymade “heralds the realisation that art can be made from anything whatsoever.” If this is the case then the readymade “makes of all aesthetic judgements something unconvincing, derivative, second-hand,” perhaps even deliberately “invoking” criticism before the artwork is even constructed. If the inherent structural and aesthetic function of all things is predetermined, as though fulfilling some underlying design, it is the artist’s intentionality in naming the object as art - a model of explanation “that abducts from external products to internal processes, from what is visible to what must be inferred” - that deliberately places and fixes these objects in a new moment in space and time.

Through appropriation, readymades “make their claim to the dignity of an art object through some unexpected presentation that decontextualises them and pulls them away from their daily use.” Through appropriation, artists laud everyday objects as art for all to see. Through appropriation, art institutes emphasise the power of the art institution, the readymade made taxidermied, stuffed object, placed on a stand, an everyday object lauded as art for all to see. In this scenario, the desire of manufacturing that wants consumer objects to be seen as useful, valuable is inverted as readymades become institutional objects of desire just out of reach of the audience (10,000 dollar coins just
lying around on the floor!). The death of the object as an object and its reanimation “to the dignity of an art object” is completed “simply by its presence in the museum.”10 As Elizabeth Wilson states, “The only defence against transgressive desire is to turn either oneself or the object of desire to stone.”11 In this case it is the museum officials that turn the object of desire into stone (by lionising them as readymades). In actuality, these objects that artists imagine explore the dichotomy between presence and absence and the nature of transgressive desire.

Andrew Liversidge

_IN MY MIND I KNOW WHAT I THINK BUT THAT’S ONLY BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE_

2009

10,000 $1 coins (AUD)
Essentially, the concept of the readymade is both elastic (like the band that holds together the brick and book cover in Claire Fontaine’s witty La société du spectacle brickbat 2006) and fixed (like the brick itself), the readymade being both a performative act (ritualised play) and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects it names. Further, a link can be made to Bachelard’s theory of space and imagination which describes literary space as reflexive, resonant and moulded by consciousness. In their playfulness the spatial dynamics of readymades challenge and illuminate the human, sensory possibility. They examine how the reality of contemporary life is disguised and concealed from view, and how human beings are alienated from the very objects that they produce. For the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, “(The) critique of everyday life is ... at once a rejection of the inauthentic and the alienated, and an unearthing of the human which still lies buried therein.”

“One avenue for this unearthing is what Lefebvre describes as moments of presence - fleeting, sensate instants in which the “totality of possibilities contained in daily existence” were revealed. While destined to pass in an instant, it is through such moments that we are able to catch glimpses of the relation between the everyday and the social totality.” This philosophy or theory of moments was developed in opposition to Bergson’s understanding of time as a linear duration (duree) of separate instances and for Lefebvre, these “moments are “experiences of detachment from the everyday flow of time” which puncture the banality of everyday life...”
Claire Fontaine

*La société du spectacle brickbat*

2006

Bricks and brick fragments, laser impression

178.0 x 108.0 x 58.0 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York
“All the activities that constitute everyday life must then be rethought in terms of a
dialectic of presence and absence and each moment is simultaneously an opportunity for
alienation and disalienation.”17 The readymade, then, explores the politically radical
potential that lies within the everyday through play and the intentionality of the artist.
Through representation, readymades mediate between absence and presence; through
poësis they begin to inhabit another time and space.

“In the poetic act, presence is the given. Lefebvre intends ‘poetic’ to cover unalienated
production - the Greek poësis - as he explained in The Production of Space (1974)...

Presence and poësis stand outside social relations of production. Flashes of inspiration,
moments when one feels ‘all together’ and ‘in touch’, are not determined by economic
relations, and cannot be prevented, even in a prison camp.”18

Readymades are a reaction against the linear production of industry, which is both
functional and hierarchical. They are a reaction against the banality and repetition of the
everyday - of the hegemony of capitalist production and the social relations of everyday
life. In a culture of use and use by, the readymade “inscribes the work of art within a
network of signs and pre-existing material.”19 Theses assemblages enable us to ask the
question, what makes aesthetic judgement possible. They offer an alternative form of
resistance to the imposition of linear repetition, through a form of mental and visual play.
The moment of the representation encloses a transition (something transitory, something
which ‘traverses’)20 - through a plethora of creative, emotive and imaginative practices -
from something stable to un/stable.
This transition is a flash, a boundary where this becomes that, not then, not that - falling in love, jumping of a bridge. Alive : dead; presence : absence; purpose : play; mastery : exhaustion; logos : silence; worldly : transcendent. Not this, not that. It is an impossible presence, present - a moment of unalienated production that we know exists but we cannot define it, place it. How can we know love? We can speak of it in a before and after sense but it is always a past moment that we recognise.

It is the same with the readymade. The inscriptions on the early readymades (such as the bottle dryer and urinal) detailing authorship, dates, times, places can be seen as an attempt to ‘fix’ an individual artwork in the flow of time, to distinguish it from its unacknowledged neighbour - like “fixing” a photograph. It is telling that when the bottle rack was lost and remade in the 1960s the text that was originally on the lower metal ring was lost with the object itself. The text sought to fix these transitory moments of absence : presence.

Søren Kierkegaard calls this transition a “leap,” where a human being chooses an ethical life-view, one that resides in the actual and not in an ironic-aesthetic attitude.

“It is important to see that choice, as the characteristic of the ethical lifeview, forms a radical break with the ironic spiral of the aesthetic attitude. Kierkegaard sometimes calls the ethical choice a “leap,” a term that expresses the fundamental uncertainty of each commitment to actuality: contrary to aesthetic fantasy, which is “safely” self-contained, the outcome of the individual’s ethical choice is dependent on actuality and therefore not fully under the individual’s control. This is a decisive difference between aesthetic irony
(including meta-irony) and the ethical leap: instead of merely rejecting all actuality, the latter takes responsibility for a certain actuality and tries to reshape it.”22

And tries to reshape it. Thus we can say that readymades are human beings taking responsibility for their actuality by choosing to name an object as art, creating objects that challenge aesthetic value judgements and an ironic-aesthetic lifeview through their very presence, by their very selfness. Remembering (ah memory!), that it is always a past moment that we recognise. The familiar is not necessarily the known - it has to be named.

This essay was written for a posting on the exhibition Reinventing the Wheel: the Readymade Century at the Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA), Melbourne by Dr Marcus Bunyan in December 2013, for the Art Blart blog (http://artblart.com)
Lou Hubbard

*Stretch*

2007

Two 'Studio K' Planet lamps, fluorescent lights, MDF, acrylic paint and Perspex

108.3 x 251.8 x 29.0 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Sarah Scout, Melbourne

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Jeff Koons

*Balloon dog (Red)*

1995 designed

Porcelain, ed. 1113/2300

11.3 x 26.3 cm diameter

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Endnotes


4. Ibid.,
5. Ibid.,
6. Butler, op. cit.,
8. Duve, op. cit. p. 91
9. “Still, appropriationism, which defines the end-of-art condition, is pretty much the defining principle of our moment, putting, as it does, everything and every combination of things at the service of art, even including bad drawing and bad painting, since these, being designated, tell us only what kind of point the artist who appropriates them intends, not what kind of artist she or he is.”
Danto, op. cit.,
10. Duchamp, Marcel. Definition of the readymade in the Dictionnaire abrégé du Surréalisme quoted in Duve, op. cit. p. 92


21. Duve, op. cit. p. 91