The Richard Mutt Case

They say any artist paying six dollars may exhibit.

Mr. Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion this article disappeared and never was exhibited.

What were the grounds for refusing Mr. Mutt's fountain:—

1. Some contended it was immoral, vulgar.
2. Others, it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing.

Now Mr. Mutt's fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bath tub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see every day in plumbers' show windows.

Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object.

As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges.

Let us consider two important factors, the two poles of the creation of art: the artist on one hand, and on the other the spectator who later becomes the posterity.

To all appearances, the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing.

If we give the attributes of a medium to the artist, we must then deny him the state of consciousness on the esthetic plane about what he is doing or why he is doing it. All his decisions in the artistic execution of the work rest with pure intuition and cannot be translated into a self-analysis, spoken or written, or even thought out.

T. S. Eliot, in his essay on “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” writes: “The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.”

Millions of artists create; only a few thousands are discussed or accepted by the spectator and many less again are consecrated by posterity.

In the last analysis, the artist may shout from all the rooftops that he is a genius; he will have to wait for the verdict of the spectator in order that his declarations take a social value and that, finally, posterity includes him in the primers of Art History.

I know that this statement will not meet with the approval of many artists who refuse this mediumistic role and insist on the validity of their awareness in the creative act—yet, art history has consistently decided upon the virtues of a work of art through considerations completely divorced from the rationalized explanations of the artist.

If the artist, as a human being, full of the best intentions toward himself and the whole world, plays no role at all in the judgment of his own work, how can one describe the phenomenon which prompts the spectator to react critically to the work of art? In other words how does this reaction come about?

This phenomenon is comparable to a transference from the artist to the spectator in the form of an esthetic osmosis taking place through the inert matter, such as pigment, piano or marble.

But before we go further, I want to clarify our understanding of the word “art”—to be sure, without an attempt to a definition.

What I have in mind is that art may be bad, good or indifferent, but, whatever adjective is used, we must call it art, and bad art is still art in the same way as a bad emotion is still an emotion.

Therefore, when I refer to “art coefficient,” it will be understood that I refer not only to great art, but I am trying to describe the subjective mechanism which produces art in a raw state—à l’état brut—bad, good or indifferent.

In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of
totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward the realization is a series of efforts, pains, satis-
ifications, refusals, decisions, which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least
on the esthetic plane.

The result of this struggle is a difference between the intention and its realization, a
difference which the artist is not aware of.

Consequently, in the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing.
This gap which represents the inability of the artist to express fully his intention; this differ-
ence between what he intended to realize and did realize, is the personal “art coefficient”
contained in the work.

In other words, the personal “art coefficient” is like an arithmetical relation between the
unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.

To avoid a misunderstanding, we must remember that this “art coefficient” is a personal
expression of art “à l’état brut,” that is, still in a raw state, which must be “refined” as pure
sugar from molasses, by the spectator; the digit of this coefficient has no bearing whatso-
ever on his verdict. The creative act takes another aspect when the spectator experiences
the phenomenon of transmutation; through the change from inert matter into a work of
art, an actual transubstantiation has taken place, and the role of the spectator is to deter-
mine the weight of the work on the esthetic scale.

All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the
work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner quali-
fications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvi-
ous when posterity gives its final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists.

Apropos of “Readymades” (1961)

IN 1913 I HAD THE HAPPY IDEA TO FASTEN A BICYCLE WHEEL TO A KITCHEN STOOL
AND WATCH IT TURN.

A FEW MONTHS LATER I BOUGHT A CHEAP REPRODUCTION OF A WINTER EVENING LANDSCAPE,
WHICH I CALLED “PHARMACY” AFTER ADDING TWO SMALL DOTS, ONE RED AND ONE YELLOW, IN
THE HORIZON.

IN NEW YORK IN 1915 I BOUGHT AT A HARDWARE STORE A SNOW SHOVEL ON WHICH I WROTE
“IN ADVANCE OF THE BROKEN ARM.”

IT WAS AROUND THAT TIME THAT THE WORD “READymade” CAME TO MIND TO DESIGNATE
THIS FORM OF MANIFESTATION.

A POINT WHICH I WANT VERY MUCH TO ESTABLISH IS THAT THE CHOICE OF THESE “READy-
MADEs” WAS NEVER DICTATED BY ESTHETIC DELECTATION.

THIS CHOICE WAS BASED ON A REACTION OF VISUAL INDIFFERENCE WITH AT THE SAME TIME
A TOTAL ABSENCE OF GOOD OR BAD TASTE . . . IN FACT A COMPLETE ANESTHESIA.

* Marcel Duchamp, “Apropos of ‘Readymades,’” (lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 19 Oc-
tober 1961), in Art and Artists 1, no. 4 (July 1966): 47; reprinted in Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., Salt Seller:
The Writings of Marcel Duchamp (Marchand du Sel) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 141–42.
SCRIBED ON THE "READYMADE."

THAT SENTENCE INSTEAD OF DESCRIBING THE OBJECT LIKE A TITLE WAS MEANT TO CARRY THE MIND OF THE SPECTATOR TOWARDS OTHER REGIONS MORE VERBAL.

SOMETIMES I WOULD ADD A GRAPHIC DETAIL OF PRESENTATION WHICH IN ORDER TO SATISFY MY CRAVING FOR ALLITERATIONS, WOULD BE CALLED "READYMADE AIDED."

AT ANOTHER TIME WANTING TO EXPOSE THE BASIC ANTIMONY BETWEEN ART AND READYMADES I IMAGINED A "RECIPROCAL READYMADE": USE A REMBRANDT AS AN IRONING BOARD!

I REALIZED VERY SOON THE DANGER OF REPEATING INDISCRIMINATELY THIS FORM OF EXPRESSION AND DECIDED TO LIMIT THE PRODUCTION OF "READYMADES" TO A SMALL NUMBER YEARLY. I WAS AWARE AT THAT TIME, THAT FOR THE SPECTATOR EVEN MORE THAN FOR THE ARTIST, ART IS A HABIT FORMING DRUG AND I WANTED TO PROTECT MY "READYMADES" AGAINST SUCH CONTAMINATION.

ANOTHER ASPECT OF THE "READYMADE" IS ITS LACK OF UNIQUENESS. . . . THE REPLICA OF A "READYMADE" DELIVERING THE SAME MESSAGE; IN FACT NEARLY EVERY ONE OF THE "READYMADES" EXISTING TODAY IS NOT AN ORIGINAL IN THE CONVENTIONAL SENSE.

A FINAL REMARK TO THIS Egomaniac’s DISCOURSE:

SINCE THE TUBES OF PAINT USED BY THE ARTIST ARE MANUFACTURED AND READY MADE PRODUCTS WE MUST CONCLUDE THAT ALL THE PAINTINGS IN THE WORLD ARE "READYMADES AIDED" AND ALSO WORKS OF ASSEMBLAGE.