

The Paper of Duchamp's Fountain

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Abstract

The interpretation of the work *Fountain* is divided into three parts: works, artists and viewers. Work part means the urinal by Marcel Duchamp's signature, and why he uses Ready-made products as works of art; Artist part refers to the time background of Duchamp life, and his lifelong belief that "Art is life". The viewer partly focuses on the people redefinition of art in *Fountain*. John Berger proposed that "Seeing precedes speech", pointing out the way to interpret traditional art from the perspective of visual perception and combining it with social, political, economic and other characteristics of the times. After Duchamp, the interpretation of modern art to the thought as the core, art works only assume the carrier utility.

Keywords

Fountain; John Berger; Marcel Duchamp.

1. Introduction

In the traditional easel painting interpretation system, the visual experience occupies the dominant position. John Berger in his *The Ways of Seeing* objective said "We are not indiscriminately accepting this view. We accept it simply because it is similar to the way we observe people, gestures, facial expressions, and customs. This is possible because we still live in a society with comparable social relationships and moral values".

Before cameras became popular, this kind of delicate emotion that caused the viewer to experience "understanding" was the most precious feeling that artistic creation could present. Berger thinks "It is the reason that make the portrait presented a kind of psychological and social aspects of the sense of urgency. And it is this -- not the art of the painter as 'the tempter' -- that convinces us that we understand the sitter". In traditional artistic creation, emotions often give expression to artistic conception, which eventually expresses the spirit. But with the birth of *Fountain*, art took on a new look.

2. Works Part

2.1. Duchamp's Fountain

In 1917, Duchamp gave his girlfriend Beatrice Wood (1893-1998) five dollars annual fee and one dollar for the exhibition space and the *Fountain*, and asked her to send his work to the largest art exhibition in the history of the United States, *The Independent Artists Salon*. Within the envelope attached with application form and six dollars, name is "*Fountain*", the author is "Artist MUTT, from Philadelphia". The ordinary male urinals and signature "R.Mutt 1917" has since become he officially declared war on the traditional symbol. Ingres's pure and hazy "*La Source*" is the peak of the French neoclassical period in the history of Western Art, while Duchamp named a urinal the *Fountain*, which shows his contempt for tradition and authority.

Duchamp's *Fountain* is a porcelain urinal from 1917 for Mr. Mott (J.I.M OTT), an American manufacturer of sanitary equipment. The "Mutt" in the signature is derived from the manufacturer's name "Mott". Duchamp caused a stir when he was able to send his work straight to the showroom because his membership of the organizing committee gave him uncensored

privileges. The controversy over the work continued until the night before the preview, when ten members of the organizing committee voted to reject the exhibition. *Duchamp* and his friend *Walter Arensberg (1878-1954)* withdrew from the organization of the Independent Artists Salon to indicating their positions.

Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) photographed *Duchamp's* work, which was not in the exhibition. Although the original was lost because of its rather ordinary appearance, the *Fountain's* fame grew. In 1987, the *Menney Museum* in Houston, United States, held a special exhibition for the *Fountain* in the absence of the original, showing hundreds of imitations and derivatives. *Fountain* has broken the dominant status of vision in the artistic creation, and maximum aesthetics and interest brought by the weakening of the work. Numerous papers have been written about this work, and interest continues to this day.

2.2. Ready-made Products as Works of Art

Duchamp considers Ready-made to be: the authority of art against custom. The purpose of his use of Ready-made works is to be utterly indifferent and uninteresting. "You must approach it with indifference, as if you had no aesthetic sensibility. Ready-made products are often chosen on the basis of visual coldness and avoiding good and bad taste". "If your choice enters it, then taste enters -- good taste, bad taste, boring taste, etc. -- and taste is the enemy of art".[6]

He wants to get rid of centuries of European deification of artists and go back to the nature of art's birth, to the ancient Greek view of artists as artisans. In order to change the traditional definition of artist and tear down the label of stereotype, *Duchamp* tried to find something that had no aesthetic or interest.

In 1914, he quietly chose the bottle rack that every household in France had, and took this too ordinary object as his work "*Bottle Rack*" without any changes. This is *Duchamp's* exploration of the concept of *Ready-made products*.

Compared with "*Bicycle Wheel*", "*Pharmacy*" and other early works, *Duchamp's* anti-authority on Ready-made products is most fully expressed in *Bottle Rack*. Completely deny the truth, goodness and beauty in art, deny any interest, but also deny the nature of aesthetics. There is no beauty, there is no ugliness.

Duchamp's absolute sobriety kept him at arm's length from man-made creations such as science, reason and language. He thinks "*Meaning is artificial thing; human will be blinded in the way of discovering the truth of cosmos due to limitations of man-made objects which are finite in the universal*". He uses Ready-made products to offset the divinity of art and uses meaningless inscriptions on his works to express his opposition to lofty rationality. He does subtraction for painting, for art do subtraction, also do subtraction for life.

His works are not anti-art for art's sake, nor do they pursue interest for entertainment. He secretly does what he wants to do by defecting art, unconsciously becoming one of the highest status artists in western art history.

3. Artist Section

3.1. Pioneer Thought and Exploration

At the beginning of the 20th century, European technology and culture get unprecedented prosperity and development. The disintegration of *French Academism*, the invention of camera, people's pursuit of flat decorative effect and so on, all of which pave the way for the active trend of thought in art. Young artists mostly focus on how to innovate and create new forms and express people's inner psychology under the strong impact of industrial revolution. In such an active painting atmosphere, new ideas collide and new painting emerge one after another.

Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and the African wood carvings of accidental encounter made him touch the color world colorful magnificent, his fierce use of color changed the delicate style of the traditional color system, leading to the creation of the bold and wild "*Fauvism*".

Matisse was *Pablo Picasso's (1881-1973)* artistic rival in the early years, and his new work "*Le bonheur de vivre*", exhibited at the *Independent Salon in The Autumn* of 1906, put new pressure on *Picasso's* desire for change to make a breakthrough.

The landscape painting by *Georges Braque (1882—1963)* rejected by the salon in the autumn of 1908, was a bold attempt to transform objects and foreshadowed his subsequent encounter with *Picasso*. *Matisse* commented on *Braque's* work as "*landscapes with cubes*", and *Louis Vauxcelles* later quoted it in *Gil Blass* magazine. Thus, after the vitriol of the critic who named it *Fauvism*, *Cubism* also in the name of art.

At the beginning of the *Cubism* creation, *Picasso's Les Femmes D'Alger (O.J. Version O)* was not appreciated by anyone. Even *Stein (Gertrude Stein, 1874-1946)* -- who is famous for its new vision of the "*Mother of The Modernist*" -- she also refused to talk about it.

Around 1910, four-dimensional space theory became a hot topic among Western intellectuals. In *Les Femmes D'Alger*, the front and back of the model are presented in one work at the same time. This spatial paradox makes the viewer think it is a typical work that introduces the time factor into the painting.

Although the multi-angle or multi-space picture presented by the picture is different from the way people used to watch art works and does not have the visual pleasure in the traditional painting semantics, the disassembly of the painting object strengthens the rationality to a new height.

Impressionism only focused on light and shadow while weakening the structure, while *Fauvism* emphasized the decorative meaning of the picture and the sense of form of color. The long-term neglect of rigorous structure reached the bottom and rebounded in *Cubism*. The rationality respected by western painting system is fully reflected in this work, which turns people from vivid visual records back to objective picture structure.

Cubism pursues aesthetic feeling of form in the arrangement and combination of geometry, and the overlapping and staggered of different viewpoints convey the continuity of time, which is a comprehensive innovation to the concept of abstract painting.

Picasso's personal discontent, even irritation, at *Cubism* by definition did not in the least affect the large-scale exhibition of works by his followers in the salon of independence in 1911, makes the cubist caused a sensation in Paris, leading a world trend.

If we can say that *Matisse* liberated color and *Picasso* break the confine form, then *Duchamp* is eliminated the rules of modern art, then opened a new chapter of post-modern art by himself.

3.2. Art is Life

Duchamp believed that "*When the work is completed, the work and the artist can be separated. The work has its own life and is more important than the former*". The work and the artist become two independent individuals with their own destiny. A work is no longer under the artist's control after it is created, and its fate is no longer decided by the artist himself, no matter how it changes.

The same is true of *Fountain*. By the *Fountain* was constantly discussed and mentioned, the original was nowhere to be found. It brings to the audience philosophical thinking, a lever to move the definition of art, a sharp blade to break free from the shackles of tradition, and a landmark work in art history.

The feelings of the viewer when appreciating the work of art elicit an emotional response rather than an irrational judgment, and this passively induced emotion is regarded as an aesthetic response. In 1949, *Duchamp* was invited to participate in the *Western Modern Art Round-table*

in San Francisco and openly put forward that “A person takes an active attitude when using his interest, and becomes passive and obedient when he is immersed in aesthetic response”.

However, the “*Seeing precedes Speech*” proposed by John Berger is based on vision and has a clear aesthetic tendency. Berg points out a distinct-obvious way to understand art from the perspective of traditional easel painting: from the perspective of visual perception, in-depth analysis of art and politics, gender, economy and close links.

Personal opinion, “*Seeing*” refers to the information receiving, “*Speech*” refers to the transfer of information. From the perspective of the viewer to explain, the two can be interpreted as the order of information acquisition, or from the perspective of “*Visual First*” of traditional easel painting, the interpretation of art must first satisfy the visual pleasure.

To feel pleasure at the same time, the interpretation of the work has been mixed with the audience’s own comprehensive factors and subjective cognitive judgment. The aesthetic pleasure brought by vision is emotional reaction. The viewer takes the initiative to feel the works with his innate interest. But, when information enters the stage of “*Speech*” and enters the field of aesthetics, the output ideas of the audience are intervened by reason and language. The limitation of *Artificial Things* inevitably causes deviation between the works and the information received in the stage of “*Seeing*”.

In contrast to Berg, Duchamp’s “*Art is life*” is not confined to any field.

Duchamp think artists state is more important than his art. Henri-pierre Roche (1879-1959), a close friend of Duchamp, said at the end of his memoirs that “*The best works of Duchamp were the hours he spent*”, which has become the most appropriate assessment of Duchamp known to all. Duchamp was also willing to accept such evaluation, and said to others, “*If you like to look at it that way, my art can be alive: every second and every breath is a work, which leaves no trace, invisible and impossible to think about. It’s a happy feeling*”.

He never avoids being biased, so he does not defend the *Ready-made*, and *Fountain* does not speak for Duchamp. No matter how the viewer interprets the artist himself or guesses the motive of his creation, the work does not represent the artist, nor can the artist speak for the work.

Duchamp lived in a state of anonymity and underpaid for a long time in his life, and his inner harmony and peace were never shaken by external fame and money. He is an artist who directly feel achieves the Zen concept and realizes that “*Not pleased by external gains, not saddened by things losses*”. Therefore, Duchamp’s heart is abundant, full of freedom and sobriety.

4. Viewer Section

4.1. “Redefinition” of Art

In 1917, *The Independent Artists Salon* exhibited 2,125 works. Due to the absolute open policy adopted by the exhibition, the exhibits range from the most traditional to the most modern, which deserves to be the largest art exhibition in American history. In an exhibition like this, even by the most open-minded people of the time, even if the organizers wanted to embody the spirit of freedom and tolerance, the *Fountain* cannot be accepted. When Stieglitz photographed it after the things, the careful lighting and grace camera angle almost made this ordinary porcelain urinal as sacred and pure as a nun’s model -- still the traditional concept of beauty.

This also confirms that all changes at that time were under the premise of accepting art. On the basis of satisfying visual pleasure and aesthetic needs, no matter how novel and bold techniques, no matter how much attention is paid to light and shadow or structure, the final work presented is *beauty*, or can be understood *beautiful*. All the painters before Duchamp wanted find principles for attribution, and standards for rational existence.

But “*Great music is faintness voice, Great form is beyond shape*”, *Duchamp* thought it was ridiculous to establish standards. For standards are changing all the time, and the laws of science, fixed knowledge, are always in constant motion. He was against definition, against fixation, and said that “*Any fixation is against the nature of things*”. This is the core reason why he never belonged to any faction.

Duchamp weakened the impregnable position of art in people’s minds with “*Ready-made products*”, fundamentally subverting the inherent concepts and established standards of art. Easel painting is no longer the only way of artistic creation, and art itself is facing the situation of being redefined. The inherent constant motion and change make people try to discuss the principles of modern art through continuous innovation and exploration. However, *Duchamp* did not believe in immutable principles that could guide art. He just wanted to avoid the principle and truth, these metaphysical concepts. *Duchamp’s* claim that “*Artists and works can be separated*” is to dissolve the importance of artists, change the total dependence on artists in traditional art, and break the inherent thinking that judging whether a work of art is good or bad is entirely determined by artists.

To strengthen the importance of individual artists is undoubtedly to promote the isolation of art, which will inevitably lead to one-sided thinking and cognition, thus distorting the truth and becoming more and more distant from reality.

Duchamp’s work is always not understood by contemporary people, but he is unaffected by it. Because he clearly knows that it is not his problem that his work is not understood, but that his ideas are ahead of the current era and people cannot accept them. He truly abandoned the visual nature of art and made art serve the thought. *Duchamp’s* most prominent contribution was in the field of philosophy. He began to understand that art could not be defined precisely when he started Ready-made products as his work. This perception became clearer and clearer in the decades that followed when he continued to defect from art. This amazing insight made it easy for *Duchamp* to see beneath the surface. He saw the truth of art, and gradually saw the truth of life. He was more interested in the state of the artist than in his work because he understood all these truths.

Duchamp easier than anyone else to do it is not controlled by the self-desires. And in his life long term, he did.

4.2. Interpretation of Modern Art

Berg’s view of “*Seeing precedes speech*” is that thoughts and feelings can be translated into words and exported to others. In spite of some errors and errors, it is a clear and definite method from the rational point of view of *Artificial thing*. This method not only conforms to the aesthetic pursuit in the sense of traditional painting, catering to people’s established impression on art for thousands of years, but also provides relatively objective theoretical evidence to find appropriate reasons for the composition, color and plot of the picture, so that it can reasonably appear on the artist’s canvas. It is still the preferred method of interpreting painters’ work today.

Duchamp’s artistic views are inseparable from his pursuit of freedom, feeling of movement and sharp insight into all things in the world. All his life, he tried to create a thing together the four identities of director, actor, scriptwriter and audience in a process of movement change, and achieved the true freedom of thought through his own method. It is because of this lifelong pursuit of freedom that *Duchamp* searched out the concept of *Ready-made products*. He did this for help people to break free from the shackles of the time and change people’s direct obedience to the long-standing stereotype of artists.

He played a fundamental role in the breakthrough of modern art, and many artistic factions were more or less influenced by *Duchamp*, among which *Dadaism* was the most prominent. Although he did not acknowledge his involvement in the founding of *Dadaism*, all *Dadaists*

regarded *Duchamp* as their spiritual mentor. Through the systematization of *Dadaism*, “*Ready-made*” gradually became a new kind of art and was sought after by people. In contemporary art, it goes to the other extreme of “*beauty*” -- deliberately ugly works, trying to cause the discomfort of the audience as much as possible.

Personally, the core of interpreting modern art lies in thought. A painting that does not make one think from the heart does not deserve to be called a formal work. There is no absolute understanding of modern art, It is not just traditional painting that has been fundamentally altered, but also long-held stereotypes of artists. Driven by time, *Duchamp's* idea that “*Art is life*” gradually became the mainstream of his thoughts. Changes of the times will make the work more interpretation and speculation, but there is no standard answer for art, even if never have answer. This has been throughout the long history of mankind, the same was true in the painting factions were full of the 20th century, and same in future.

5. Conclusion

As a forerunner of the real world, art is instructive and enlightening in politics, economics and gender relations. The emergence of new paintings and changes often indicate that the great storm is subtly changing everyone.

The *Embodiment* of the “*Classical period*” was replaced by the *humanity* of the “*Renaissance*” period after a long period of *Deification* of the “*Middle Ages*”. The softness of “*French Academic*” was replaced by “*Impressionism's* clever use of light and color; “*Fauvism*” took color out of the real color system; *Duchamp* used urinals to challenge the modern definition of art; *Hot and Cold Abstraction*, *Dadaism*, *Deconstruction*, *Cubism*, *Surrealism* and other restless painting factions have brought artists' inspiration to unprecedented heights.

Unlike the *Humanist* of the “*Renaissance*”, with its narrative plots and backstories, or the artists rebellion against the shackles of modern art, contemporary artists pursue inner expression. Abstract painting makes people pay more attention to people's inner, spiritual, emotional and feeling. It is pure self-supremacy, an externalized expression of the inner world, an intimate expression of absolute individuality and relative isolation.

Duchamp's Fountain cannot be defined, but this indefinable work gradually forms its own system over time -- “*Ready-made art*”, which plays an important role in contemporary art. Perhaps decades or even hundreds of years later, the roots of the future direction of art can be found in these constantly exploring works.

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