

Looking at readymades

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What do you see when you look at readymades?

First of all, we mustn't forget that, albeit merely a theoretical hypothesis, "pure" readymades would be pre-existing objects that are exhibited as they are as works of art: the object itself without any perceptible difference. And it is because of this impossibility to tell the difference between one and the other that Arthur Danto deduced the end of art, meaning previous models of art, based on representation or expression, but also the transition from art to philosophy, resulting in an art which is reflection on art itself (it can be noted that the premises are the same as Joseph Kosuth's, but that he reaches the opposite conclusion: art comes after philosophy, as he entitles his famous book, because all reflection about art must be carried out within art itself). Another excellent example is provided by Thierry de Duve who got as far as suggesting, once: imagine you are an alien coming to earth after the end of the human genre, what could you think upon finding *Fountain* in an art museum? The rhetorical device is used in order to examine all 20th century art theories from the point of view of readymades: theoretical objects for him as well, then.

But when we ask What do you see? we really mean What do you see? Everybody knows that the Italian verb "vedere" (to see) comes from the Greek term referring to both "seeing" and "theory", but theorizing from what you see is different to seeing from what you theorize. So, do you see the Duchamp-like gesture of choosing, extracting, decontextualizing and conceptualizing? Or maybe, following Heidegger, do you see a gesture that is indicative not of art but of the "thing", in its self-contained refusal to be pushed around? Or, according to Lacan, the thing as real in its impossible, unstainable, insignificant foundation, which cannot be seen and is "indifferent", as Duchamp would say?

Or else, do you see the object that is the same but, let's say it again, other at the same time? Look twice, Bertand Rougé says as, by way of Danto, he criticizes all those who only look once. It's the same object but at the same time it's different, there's a deviation, a "delay" as Duchamp used to say, between the "two" objects, between the object and its being a work of art. And that is truly essential: that deviation, that minimal, imperceptible but nonetheless real difference, which Duchamp calls "infrathin".

Let's not forget that infrathin is the definition he used for phenomena like – in his famous examples – the smell of a mouth married to that of the smoke it exhales, recto and verso in a leaf, substances like glass, smoke, dust, features like possibility and reciprocity. Readymades have then to be looked at infrathinly, as a "high-speed exposure", a sort of snapshot of the passage between two states, object and art work, which is still including them both. It's an appearance, something that begins to be visible rather than something which seems to be (and you may realize I'm not using the term "invisible"), something...what?

There has been a lot of talking about Duchamp's "fourth dimension", but only from an esoteric or science-fiction point of view, and in this way metaphors have been increased rather than explained. But in fact, whatever we may mean by fourth dimension, what counts for us here is the idea that from that we derive of the third one, ours, the one which refers to reality as it appears, i.e. as a projection, a prospect, a cross-section of another one that we cannot perceive. As everybody knows, this is the reason why "The Large Glass" is on glass and not on an opaque surface, and its upper part is so undecipherable from the point of view of representation. So readymades would be objects that have been collected in order to be shown as concrete three-dimensional images, that is to say apparitions here of what is beyond: to tell us that all that is real has

to be looked at as if it were a projection – esoteric metaphors aside: a projection of itself, not necessarily of anything else, because in this way it is already other: an anamorphosis, if you prefer.

In a word, whether it makes sense or not, we mean that readymades suggest that we should look differently. What at? Everything, if possible: reality, that is to say: life. It mustn't be forgotten that Duchamp not only selected the readymades he displayed in exhibitions and museums, but he played about what he had found good and ready even when he spoke of the two children he got with his marriage to Teeny, and that even the epitaph he wanted on his tombstone, “and besides it's only the others that die”, may be stressing the fact that even life can be seen as a readymade.

And isn't art the ability to see in a different way?