
Marcel Duchamp: “Twisting Memory for the Fun of It” or a Form of Retroactive Interference? — Recalling the Impacts of Leaving Home on the Readymade

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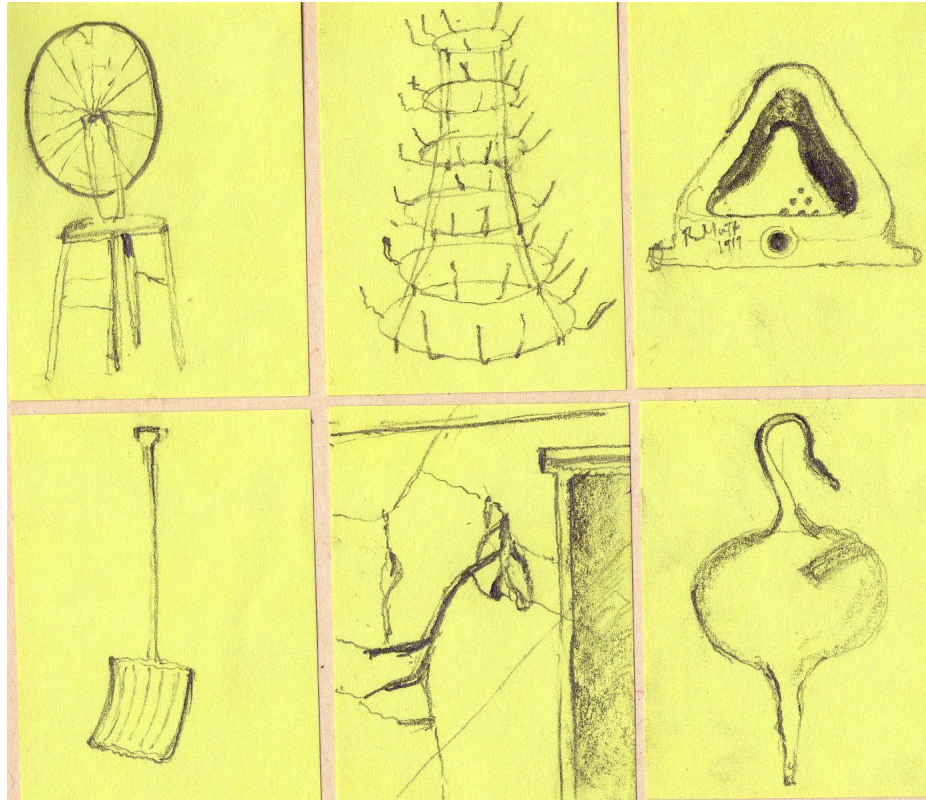
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Abstract

In the 1960s, Marcel Duchamp, arguably the most influential artist of the twentieth-century, came into real prominence and unprecedented fame. During this period he gave many interviews in which he often took a capricious stance. One topic was crucial: his comments concerning the origin of readymade works of art—mass-produced everyday objects that he first selected in 1913-1914 in Paris, and then after leaving in 1915 to New York he located other examples. In interviews he referred to the readymade as “a happy idea”,¹ but as material objects they signify and embody Duchamp’s leaving home (T.J. Demos, 2007). When leaving home, an individual works through an acculturation process during which they are never truly settled. This article considers the fate of material objects in relation to the veracity of Duchamp’s memory 50 years after the fact in the 1960s, a time when the artist was also the progenitor of a postmodern position.

Keywords: Marcel Duchamp, readymade, conceptual art, material culture

Figure 1. Esquisses of selected readymades drawn from the author's memory. Clockwise from top left: Bicycle Wheel, Bottle Dryer, Fountain, Paris Air, Sculpture for Travelling, In Advance of the Broken Arm. Pencil on yellow post-it notes, each 50 x 38 mm.



Marcel Duchamp was a new type of modern artist in the twentieth century. His invention of the readymade (souvenirs of the everyday)—*Bicycle Wheel* (1913), *Bottle Rack* (1914), the upturned urinal titled *Fountain* (1917)—were gestures that declared an end to art as humankind had known it. Original versions were thrown away or were returned to domestic use, but despite this loss, their relevance was preserved through other forms (in photographs and replicas) that enabled the legacy of the readymade to become ubiquitous in a history of late twentieth-century art.

T.J. Demos's recent work, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp* (2007), has problematised general assertions that the readymade is defined as a mass-produced object selected by an artist and conferred the status of a work of art. He locates different phases of the readymades within the socio-political contexts of their making to assert that these art forms are examples of "aesthetics of homelessness".² This is brought about when an artist is displaced from home and in exile. T.J. Demos's concept is an important touchstone for this article which focuses on a number of examples of Duchamp's work to ascertain the implications of his memory of events 50 years after the fact. In these interviews the artist is self-reflexive, eschewing the modernist notion of the primacy of individual authorship.

Two critical moments in the life of Marcel Duchamp need to be introduced; both are departures associated with memory. In 1915 when he went to the new world centre of art, New York, he travelled on board the *SS Rochembeau*. He carried with him artworks and designs that he resumed working on after his

arrival. As the journey got underway, Duchamp wrote a decisive postcard home. He crossed out the image familiar to him on the front of the postcard—the Bordeaux Bridge—deleting it as a referent for remembering home, and added an arrow pointing west “at 1,000 km” to New York and a new life. On the back he wrote: “Je ne peut pas m’apprêter de commencer à apprendre l’anglais de mon petit livre” (“I cannot bring myself to start learning English from my little book”).³ As the attachment to home is severed, memory of it resides as a trace, both as an attachment to home, yet a separation away from it.

These small but absolutely critical gestures not only acknowledged the act of separation, but also heralded courses of action for future works. The Bordeaux Bridge was familiar to Duchamp, but on 16 June 1915 it went out of view as one of the last man-made structures seen by him before heading north-west, passing the Bay of Biscay, and into the North Atlantic. In six days he would sail past the Statue of Liberty before going through customs and entering the United States.

Twenty-five years later Duchamp would again leave France for New York—at a time when Europe entered a second major conflict. Between 1936 and 1942 he utilised a range of mechanical and artisanal methods to remake 68 of his works in miniature.⁴ A number of these included replicas of his original readymades (1913-1921). He put these miniatures in a custom-made case, the *Boîte-en-Valise* (By or from Marcel Duchamp/Rose Sélavy), and secured their passage out of occupied France in the domestic luggage of American heiress and art patron, Peggy Guggenheim. Then, with the aid of a passport purporting him to be a cheese merchant, Duchamp found passage through Belgium and followed the secreted suitcase to New York. Once reunited there, he set to work on an edition of 20 originals. The *Boîte-en-Valise* has since been replicated more than 300 times in five editions and dispersed around the world.

These two artefacts—a postcard home and a suitcase containing a portable “museum”—are simultaneously a mnemonic connecting Duchamp (back) to his home and items that signal a degree of control over displacement to another country. They retain connections to a home but their scale belies actual proximity; both are designed for transit and movement (away). Also, the *Boîte-en-Valise* served a critical function in the history of art. By preserving the readymades in a three-dimensional form it helped ensure they were not forgotten.

Here is a curious thing about Marcel Duchamp’s legacy. Recognition of his work did not occur with any substantial momentum between 1913 and 1923 when he first produced the readymades. Their significance emerged after a 50-year delay, from the late 1950s through to the 1970s. During this period, artists and art professionals in galleries and museums began assimilating the significance of his work. In appraising their reception of Marcel Duchamp, the *Boîte* was a material aid to memory because the portable museum overcame physical geographies as well as temporal distance.

In the 1960s, the *Boîte* helped museums come to terms with Duchamp’s delayed influence. For instance, in 1963 when the first retrospective of his work

was staged at the Pasadena Museum of Art, the curator, Walter Hopps, drew directly from the *Boîte-en-Valise* when installing Duchamp's work and took its subtitle as the name for the show: *By or from Marcel Duchamp/Rose Sélavy*. Deferred action—catching up with influences from the past in the present—had the effect of hastening the need to understand events in Duchamp's past. But the veracity of his comments begs the question of historicity.

Enter the 1960s interviews. Historians are cautious in regard to Duchamp's memory of the origin of readymades via his remarks and commentary made in interviews in this decade. Far from a matter of mere record, speaking in this decade about work made 50 years earlier provided Duchamp with a unique opportunity to exploit temporality. This served his philosophical approach to art very well. "There is always a deformation," he remarked in 1967, "a distortion ... you, in spite of yourself, change the story as you saw it, because you have not an exact memory or you want to twist it for the fun of it."⁵ Duchamp understood that his biography was not central to understanding his work. He eschewed the modernist position that the author is the key to understanding. Instead his position *became* "postmodern". In 1990 Duchamp scholar, Craig Adcock, observed in his essay, "Duchamp's Way: Twisting our Memory of the Past for the Fun of It": *Duchamp makes misinterpretation and misreading part of his meaning ... he adopts history modification as a strategy. Reformation becomes a method of production. He gives the notion of memory—and faulty memory—a philosophical position ... he uses twisted memory on the one hand as a way of keeping interpreters off balance, of avoiding being boxed in.*⁶

In 1960s interviews, he calmly controlled the interview format and would never disagree; believing there was no need to argue. He once stated: "There is no solution because there is no problem."⁷ Duchamp did not tell all in a single interview, giving facts out in bite-sized pieces. He would deliberately correct himself across interviews as though laying a trap for interpreters, critics, and commentators. In the same way, one has to work across the range of works in his *œuvre* to arrive at an understanding of his position. One example is sufficient: in no interview in the 1960s did he disclose the fact that he had been working on a large, new artwork for 20 years (1946-1966). This was made in a secret studio that one gained access to through a secret door via a shared bathroom at his apartment on West 14th Street, New York. He would look interviewers in the eye and perpetuate the myth of his retirement from art. "Quite simply, I am waiting for death," he once said.⁸ Then the year following his death in October 1968, the 20-year project (*Étant Donnés*) was unveiled at the Philadelphia Museum of Art to the incredibility and shock of the art world.

However, did attention directed at Duchamp—a man in his late seventies—give rise in the 1960s to a fate of retroactive interference? This occurs when someone becomes subject to new experience that skews abilities to implement past facts or knowledge. As a term used in psychology it is more than useful to apply to an artist's memory of past events when the artist himself becomes the subject of

attention in popular media.⁹ Certainly Duchamp toyed with facts in his past, but the attention placed on him arguably also made it easier to respond with irony than be held account to historical accuracy (such a stance is the postmodern artist's prerogative: to adopt a sceptical view). The relatively newfound experience of aura and fame in the 1960s inflected his replies, arguably altering his capacity to recall from memory and forcing his tongue-in-cheek mythologising of the past.

The relationship memory has to autobiography is a retroactive impulse when writing or speaking about the self. In his seminal essay, "The Autobiographical Pact", Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality".¹⁰ Writing in an era of the "post-self" means the epistemological foundation of the truth of one's self in autobiographical narrative as a credible source of meaning is highly contested. Autobiography is as much character fiction. The historian needs to consider that the Duchamp in the 1960s interviews demonstrates more his character than it reveals historical fact. In a 1965 letter he declared, "I flatly refuse to write an autobiography. It has always been a hobby of mine to object to the written I, I, I's on the part of an artist".¹¹ For Duchamp meaning was not arrived at through an autonomous expressive individual. He celebrated the polyphony of more than one voice—seen in the invention of aliases such as R. Mutt and Rose Sélavy—the latter name was adopted for his notorious female alter ego, an artist born in 1921. In his influential *Creative Act* lecture (1957) he espoused the role that the audience played in completing the work of art's meaning; and Duchamp knew full well how to exploit the audience in the 1960s as a site of reception.¹²

To talk about the past is to speak back. "Retro" denotes action that is directed backwards or is reciprocal; it is like a hinge backward and yet projects forward. In interviews, Duchamp knew how to "play" the hinge between present and past. He was in a position of authorial power because his invention of the readymade in 1913 remained known at that time only to himself and his sister, Suzanne. Certainly, it is one of the greatest paradoxes in twentieth-century art that arguably the single most influential concept began as an aside. In a 1963 interview with Francis Roberts, Duchamp stated: "In 1914, even 1913, I had in my studio a bicycle wheel turning for no reason at all. Without even knowing whether I should put it with the rest of my works or even call it work."¹³

When interviewed by Pierre Cabanne in 1967 Duchamp stated: "Please note ... when I put a bicycle wheel on a stool, the fork down, there was no idea of readymade, or anything else. It was just a distraction. I didn't have any special reason for doing it, or any intention of showing it, or describing anything. No, nothing at all like that."¹⁴ In a 1968 interview with Calvin Tomkins, the artist described *Bicycle Wheel* as: "Something to have in my room the way you have fire, or a pencil sharpener, except that there was no usefulness. It was a pleasant gadget, pleasant for the movement it gave."¹⁵ His comments when recalling the past need to be treated cautiously, but then wherever the subject of the genesis

of the readymade is concerned we “only” have Duchamp’s word.¹⁶ A letter from Duchamp to Susanne reveals that the term “readymade” did not come to him until later when in New York in 1915.¹⁷ Here, the series of events when leaving Paris in 1915 and arriving in New York are crucial to this narrative. The effects of expatriation and displacement are integral to the readymade as material object, and studying these artefacts illuminates the subject’s responses to passages (geographical, psychological, temporal, and linguistic). As T.J. Demos evokes, Duchamp’s spirit of expatriation serves to recall a subject without a home, and without a fixed place, a fate to which the readymades produced after 1914 equate.

In 1961, when speaking on the subject of being an expatriate, Duchamp commented:

*Perhaps I had the spirit of expatriation, if that’s a word. It was a part of a possibility of my going out in the traditional sense of the word: that is to say from my birth, my childhood, from my habits, my totally French fabrication. The fact that you have been transplanted into something completely new, from the point of view of environment, there is a chance of you blossoming very differently, which is what happened to me.*¹⁸

T.J. Demos’s extensive reading of the ephemeral readymade *Sculpture for Travelling* (1918) is particularly poignant. He describes it as a turning point as a work that reflects the effects of displacement occurring in Duchamp’s life. Here, memory is inherent in this work’s material form and in the psychology of a subject’s transit. *Sculpture for Travelling* was made from coloured bathing caps cut into various lengths and stretched like lanyards through Duchamp’s New York studio in 1918. The work uses the elasticity of the material which, over time, would programme itself as (sculptural) memory into the readymade object. It survives today only as it is documented in photographs. As the title suggests, it could be packed into his suitcase for travel, as indeed did happen from New York to Buenos Aires in 1918, then in August 1919 on a return trip from New York to Paris.

Furthermore, linguistic play (between French and English) in the earlier readymades of 1915–1916 is also a response to the effects of expatriation; a conversionary force that transformed the physical materiality of a mass-produced object into something more fluid. Through the titles and inscriptions Duchamp gave to selected mass-produced objects when learning the English language in the period 1915–1916, he opened an avenue for other thoughts to inhabit. A specific artwork is rendered more mobile as a direct result of expatriation, because Duchamp is forced to learn English in moving from Paris to New York.

The readymade would appear to encapsulate the unsettling effects of displacement and memory of place. The readymade object is an expression of transition and expatriation. When an object is relocated from one context to another, its identity becomes unfixed in the process—it is not at home when it is made into art, nor is it ever comfortable again when returned to its usual environment. The readymade’s full linguistic conception only occurs as a fate of

expatriation in 1915 when words displace three-dimensional objects. Learning English was a mobile skill—literally learnt on board a trans-Atlantic liner. This triggered Duchamp's decision to give the readymade its first narrative title, *In Advance of the Broken Arm*—a snow shovel from a hardware store became a premonition of an accident (perhaps a slip on the sidewalk when clearing snow). Then in 1916 he inscribed the readymade *Comb* with the precise moment of its selection—"Feb. 17 1916 11 a.m."—thus playing on the legitimacy of an artist's selective sensibility.¹⁹ Duchamp dislocated an object from its accustomed place by choosing to document the moment it is removed or the next moment that can only be anticipated.²⁰ In both cases, the passage of time is also the means by which the displacement occurs, whereby the inscription memorialises an everyday object as a souvenir of that state.

While not strictly a readymade, Duchamp's 1915 *The* is the result of learning the rules of English grammar upon arrival in New York. *The* is a short one-page text written in October 1915; an asterisk * replaces the definite article "the" throughout the article. Hence Duchamp's work dislocates the subject: "the" is either spoken or written to define what noun (or noun phrase) the speaker or author refers to. By removing the definite article the person who speaks or writes is implicated by absence (the assuredness of place, the dependence upon memory); the definite article displaced from syntax in the mind of the reader also displaces the person who speaks/writes.

The motivation for Duchamp's earlier readymades in his Paris atelier in 1913 and 1914 was indifferent to such linguistic slippages *because* he was still in place (at home). However, as we know from interviews, even with these there are appreciable degrees of uncertainty. In 1919, this re-emerged when he first returned home and produced a readymade as dysfunctional souvenir (aid to memory). After taking *Sculpture for Travelling* to Buenos Aires, and spending 18 months in the Argentinean capital, on 22 June 1919 he departed on board the *SS Highland Pride*, returning to Paris four years after he had first departed. Symptomatic of the expatriate's first return home, it was a centre with which he no longer identified. This was expressed in a letter he wrote to Walter Pach: "I've been seeing all my friends here one by one. Nobody has changed, they're all still living in the same apartments with the same dust as five years ago."²¹ In another letter dated 29 September 1936 to Katherine Dreier, he wrote: "It is a curious thing (again): why I could be so energetic in America and the minute I land in Europe my muscles refuse to function."²² This comment can be linked directly to *Paris Air* (1919), an assisted readymade; an ampoule emptied of its contents and resealed by a pharmacist with a glass blow torch so as to capture and transport Paris air as a souvenir that he presented as a gift to the Arensbergs.

Was the mothballed air in reference to Duchamp's displeasure at being back in Paris and, consequently, his memories associated with that centre induced lethargy? A clue is in the label that he made and pasted onto the ampoule: "Physiological Serum" is a saline that can be absorbed quickly into the body to

help alleviate dehydrated and tired muscles—"the minute I land in Europe my muscles refuse to function". This was, of course, no assistance to Duchamp's disposition as he had instructed the bottle to be emptied out. With this it is clear that the origins of the readymade in their primary phase (1913-1921) are material objects dependent on his life and movements for their meaning, a topic that stayed the course of Duchamp's life.

Duchamp had so often avoided drawing attention to himself throughout his career, but in the 1960s his hand was forced in the interview chair. Here he toyed with memory, "twisting it" for the "fun of it", because it is not reliable. If compromised by fame to recall accurately from the past, well, with wistful smile he said just enough to keep us (still) holding on.

Endnotes

¹First seen in Duchamp's 1951 treatise titled *Apropos of Readymades*. See eds. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: De Capo Press, 1973), 141-42.

²See, T.J. Demos, "Duchamp's *Boîte-en-Valise*: Between Institutional Acculturation and Geopolitical Displacement," in *Grey Room* 08 (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002): 6-37. Other possible historical influences on Duchamp include seeing examples of collage employed by Picasso, Braque, and other painters of the period 1909-1912, although the philosophical conception of Duchamp's readymade is very different.

³Jennifer Gough-Cooper and Jacques Caumon, "Ephemerides," in ed. Pontus Hulten, *Duchamp: Life and Work* (Cambridge Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1993), entry for 8 June 1915. Thanks to Dr Patrick Laviolette for his translation from English to French.

⁴Duchamp commented: "Again a new form of expression was involved. Instead of painting something new, my aim was to reproduce the paintings and the objects that I like and collect them in a space as small as possible. I did not know how to go about it. I first thought about a book but did not like the idea. Then it occurred to me that it could be a box in which all my works would be collected and mounted in a small museum, a portable museum so to speak." Quoted in "Duchamp's *Boîte-en-Valise*: Between Institutional Acculturation and Geopolitical Displacement," 13.

⁵Interview with Jeanne Siegal, "Some Late Thoughts of Marcel Duchamp", *Arts Magazine* 43, (December 1968-January 1969): 21-22.

⁶In ed. Thierry de Duve, *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1991), 312.

⁷Harriet and Sidney Janis, "Marcel Duchamp: Anti-Artist," *View*, V(1), (March 1945): 24.

⁸"Marcel Duchamp Talking About Readymades," (Interview with Phillipe Collin,

21 June 1967), in ed. Museum Jean Tinguely Basel, *Marcel Duchamp* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2002): 37-40.

⁹Duchamp crossed the North Atlantic on many occasions between 1915 and 1923. In this period he spent six months on each side of the Atlantic because he could only obtain temporary visas to enter the United States.

¹⁰Trans. Katherine Leary and Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," in ed. Paul John Eakin, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 3-30.

¹¹Cited by the author in eds. Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon, *The Duchamp Effect* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 104, note 19.

¹²Jennifer Gough-Cooper and Jacques Caumont, "Ephemerides," entry for 28 June 1965.

¹³Quoted in Herbert Molderings, "It Is Not the Objects That Count But the Experiments," in ed. Eckhard Schneider, *Re-Object* (Kunsthaus Bregenz, 2007), 152.

¹⁴Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 47.

¹⁵Rudolf Kuenzli and Francis Naumann eds., *Marcel Duchamp Artist of the Century* (Cambridge Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1989), 122, note 11.

¹⁶Details surrounding the circumstances of Duchamp's first attempt to exhibit examples of the readymades at the Bourgeois Gallery, New York, in 1916 are sketchy at best. The two items were *Traveler's Folding Item* (1916) and *Hat Rack* (1917), positioned near to or behind the entrance door where visitors to the gallery placed their umbrellas and overcoats. Hence, they were inconspicuous and went unregistered.

¹⁷"15th January, My dear Suzanne, Now if you've been up to my place, you will have seen, in the studio, a bicycle wheel and a bottle rack. I bought this as a readymade sculpture. And I have a plan concerning this so-called bottle rack. Listen to this: here, in N.Y., I have bought various objects in the same taste and I treat them as 'readymades'. You know enough English to understand the meaning of 'readymade' that I give these objects. I sign them and I think of an inscription for them in English ... This long preamble just to say: take this bottle rack for yourself. I'm making it a 'Readymade' remotely." Quoted in Francis Nauman and Hector Obalk, *Affect Marcel: Selected Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 43-44.

¹⁸Jennifer Gough-Cooper and Jacques Caumont, "Ephemerides," entry for 1 January 1961.

¹⁹Inscription as a means to claim an artwork evolved into full-scale replicas when the lost readymades were remade by artisans in 1964 based on extant photographs of the originals.

²⁰David Reed, "The Developing Language of the Readymade," *Art History*, 8(2) (June 1985): 222. Reed writes; "The making of a readymade did not occur when Duchamp chose the comb ... but at the moment of dislocation, when he inscribed it."

²¹Letter to Walter Pach in late August 1919. See Francis Naumann and Hector Obalk, *Affect Marcel*, 89.

²²Naumannn and Obalk, *Affect Marcel*, 211.

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