

*Hanging the Work of Art:  
Love and Death in the  
Duchampian Readymades*

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Perhaps the most influential —certainly the most notorious— of Marcel Duchamp’s many innovations in twentieth-century art was his invention of the Readymades: everyday utilitarian objects recontextualized by the artist so as to be inducted into a new network of significations. Today they are credited as legitimizing ancestors of the Pop phenomenon so conspicuous in the recent artistic landscape. But a superficial reading focused on the imputed aesthetic merits of mass-cultural artefacts contravenes Duchamp’s expressed intentions and misses the real subversive import of these revolutionary works. Better attuned to Duchamp’s own conception is their understanding as polemical demonstrations of the art-work’s status as *cosa mentale* (to quote Duchamp’s role-model Leonardo da Vinci), an intellectual creation independent of the mere act of physical fabrication. This aspect has indeed received much comment, albeit often of a highly generalized and abstracted sort. Less has been said about another set of implications, generated by the specific artistic tactics deployed in these productions. Which searchingly examine the nature of the work of art and of our fraught relationship to it.

The fundamental mechanism in the creation of a Readymade is the act of separation the displacement of the target object from its expected context and function, enabling hitherto latent features to surface and thereby generating new Duchampian associations. An important instrument of this displacement is the alteration or inversion of spatial orientation. So for example the *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913, the original Readymade, preceding the coinage of the term itself, and the scandalous *Fountain* of 1916 are provocatively upended as well as disturbingly alienated from their original uses.

Frequently the target is subjected to an even more drastic intervention: it is suspended in mid-air. Sometimes this was a decision integral to the conception of the work, as in the cases, e.g., of the *Snow Shovel* (1915), the *Hat Rack* (1917), *The Unhappy Readymade* (1919), and the bird-cage assemblage *Why Not Sneeze, Rose Selavy?* (1921). But any member of the Readymade category seems potentially to have been susceptible to such treatment. Photographs of Duchamp's New York studio of 1917 show an entire family of Readymades, including (in a replacement version) the *Fountain*, which had originally been presented firmly seated, hanging suspended from the ceiling. One photograph hauntingly captures not this assembly itself but its shadows cast upon the studio wall, a motif which would recur in Duchamp's last painting, the enigmatic *Tu M'* of 1918. A special link seems to be suggested between the idea of the Readymade itself and this distinctive mode of display.

Humans stand on their feet, as do most other terrestrial creatures and constructed artefacts as well, from the simplest to the most complex. All stand upon the earth, either directly or as mediated through bases, platforms, or other bearing surfaces, or (as in the case of tools) as extensions of the human body itself. The resulting structural interdependency of weight and support, of horizontal and vertical axes, finds a concentrated expression in the upright human posture, with all its attendant existential and emotional implications. Humans (and by extension their creations) participate in the condition of Antaeus in his mythological combat with Hercules: deprived of his footing, his contact with the earth, his vital force is choked off. Suspension is thus a form of execution, the radical separation of

a being from its life-sustaining connections. Thus it is not surprising to find that, across a diverse spectrum of times and cultures, suspension has been a favored device of attachment and display for votive or sacrificial offerings—things made sacred by radical separation, often involving killing, from their former world.

A keen sensitivity to this problematic seems to have lodged itself early in the young Duchamp's imagination. He and his two older brothers (aspiring artists all) shared a youthful fascination with the works and persona of the fifteenth-century poet and reprobate François Villon, at the time a hero figure for Parisian literary and artistic bohemia. In raucous and bawdy verses Villon celebrated a life on the margins of society, vividly evoking the sordid alleys and garrets of late-medieval Paris, with its taverns and brothels aswarm with beggars, prostitutes and thieves. Such was he brothers' enthusiasm that the elder two would signal their independence and the inception of their lives as artists by assuming Villon's name in place of or alongside their own: the eldest, a painter, became Jacques Villon, the second, a sculptor, became Raymond Duchamp-Villon. François Villon's perhaps most famous poem is his *Ballade du pendu* ("Ballade of the Hanged Man"), which evokes the grisly spectacle of a hanged criminal, the corpse dangling from the gibbet set up at a crossroads for the edification of passers-by. This image seems deeply to have impressed the young Marcel for echoes of it recur at intervals in his later work.

In Villon's scene the hanging serves a twofold purpose: as a means of execution and as a device of display. The dangling corpse is elevated for maximum visibility and dramatized by its isolation from its surroundings. The parallel between this situation and that of

the hanging Readymades will be apparent: while egregiously exhibited, these too have in an important sense been “executed” —deprived of their relationship to the earth so that gravity becomes a purely negative and destructive force, and segregated from the contexts which formerly gave meaning to their existence. The Readymades in fact are but a special case of the work of art in general, which defines itself essentially by virtue of devices of separation —of real or virtual “framing” which sunder it from the spatial and behavioral continuum of “life” while making it conspicuous.

Such an interpretation is reinforced in the central work of the Duchampian canon, the *Large Glass*, or, to give it its full title, *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*, whose conception dates to the same year, 1913, as the first of the Readymades. *The Glass* is bisected horizontally into an upper and a lower zone. The former is the domain of the Bride, a bizarre figure fusing mechanomorphic and biomorphic elements; the latter is that of the Bachelors, a rattle-trap array of mechanomorphs caricaturing human social types and purportedly animated by highly dubious external sources of energy. This scenario is overtly an unsentimental analysis of the reciprocal workings of the machinery of amorous desire, and its paradoxical dependancy upon its own denial and frustration. (A further dimension, which I will not pursue here, involves a critique of commodity fetishism and capitalist exchange.) But it can equally well be understood as the representation of the inaccessible art work suspended above its adoring spectators. For centuries the painting had been the art object par excellence, and paintings, like the *Bride*, are hung. For Duchamp, whose identity at the time was still that of a painter accustomed to

hanging his works, this connection would have been especially immediate.

While the quasi-religious exaltation of the unattainable love-object has been a fixture of the Western imagination since the *amour courtois* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, its structural equivalent, the similarly unappeasable yearning after aesthetic plenitude, the *beau ideale*, had to await for its full expression the crystallization of the modern conception of art as a primary vehicle of spiritual realization, rivalling and eventually displacing religion itself. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning twentieth centuries —the years of Duchamp’s coming into adulthood— the credo of aesthetic absolutism and the exacerbated controversy over the competing claims of art and life had reached their heights. The experience of radical discontinuity between these two manifested itself in a new extremity of psychic tension in the encounter between spectator and work of art. The numinous potency attributed to the latter demanded from the former a correspondingly elevated capacity of recognition, a spiritual effort of which a spectator might well feel incapable. At the extreme, the resulting experience of inadequacy could be intolerable. Producing a violent reversal of feeling such as not uncommonly occurs in cases of amorous infatuation, where unrequited or rejected love can easily turn into its opposite.

Significantly, while the overt narrative of the *Glass* is largely preoccupied with the complicitous exchanges between Bachelors and Bride within the system of desire, indications are not lacking that the relations between the two involve a powerful negative component. In the *Glass*’s dystopic universe, Bride and Bachelors alike are unsparingly caricatured, but while the Bach-

elors are merely hollow and pathetically ineffectual, the Bride's aspect is grotesque and sinister. In her earlier manifestation as a painting, in August 1912, she had assaulted her creator in a terrifying nightmare. This aura of negative emotion is amplified in the vindictive tone of certain of the Bride's characterizations in the Notes which accompany the visual display of the Glass and which are specified as co-determining factors in its meaning. She may be described as caged, like a prisoner or a captive beast. Above all, she is repeatedly referred to as the *Pendu femelle* —the "Female Hanged (or Hung) Object". (The distinction drawn in English between "hung" and "hanged" has no counterpart in French.) And she is indeed "hanging" in the double sense of being suspended in space within her own upper zone and of being elevated in that zone above the realm of the Bachelors as the object of their attention. But while she is exalted on high above the yearning Bachelors, the negative implications of the term "pendu" cannot be dismissed, and it is simultaneously possible to envision her as dangling like the executed criminal of Villon's *Ballade*.

If such vengeful undertones are understood as projections of the Bachelors' thwarted adoration of the Bride, they are not unknown among the Bachelors' counterparts, the real-life public of the work of art. One of the psychological anomalies of modern spectatorship is the phenomenon of the recurrent violent attacks —apparently devoid of rational motivation— by otherwise unremarkable members of the public against works of art, especially famous and highly valued ones. Such assaults are to be distinguished from the traditional and "rational" forms of iconoclasm, justified ideologically on religious or political grounds. This new

"modern" iconoclasm —which significantly makes its first appearance in the nineteenth century— is apolitical and a religious, inspired by private emotional and psychological motives. The nineteenth-century smashing of the *Francois Vase* in Florence, in the twentieth the repeated assaults upon the *Mona Lisa* and the attack upon Michelangelo's *Pieta* in St. Peter's, more recently the defacement of a Barnett Newman on exhibit in Berlin's National gallery are random examples. These violent eruptions appear directly correlated with the diffusion into popular culture of the idea of art as transcendent value, and the celebrity thus conferred upon certain works or certain artists. The exaltation of the fetishized art-work imposes evidently unbearable pressures upon vulnerable personalities, who lash out at the imagined source of their distress.

If the Readymade is the paradigmatic case of the art-work, it is not surprising that it may evoke in concentrated form those conflicted emotions of fascination and aversion which may otherwise be only vaguely felt. The quality of menace concretized in the unsettling apparition of the Bride is in fact widely distributed among the Readymades. However mundane the original object, it rarely fails in its Readymade reincarnation to evoke a fugitive sense of the uncanny and even threatening. Indeed Duchamp, in his object-choices as much as in the subsequent manipulations, appears to have actively promoted such associations. He shrewdly perceives and exploits our bad conscience in regard to images. By adopting the device of suspension as a preferred mode of display for the Readymades, he tacitly but decisively exposes some of the fault-lines in our conflicted relationship with the idols we have set up. ■