

THE PROPERTY OF KNOWLEDGE ¹

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ABSTRACT

We can note three phases in the tradition of the readymade and appropriation since Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913. First, they include early enactments in which the readymade posed an *ontological* challenge to artworks through the equation of commodity and art object. Second, practices in which readymades were deployed *semantically* as lexical elements within a sculpture, painting, installation or projection. In a third phase, which most directly encompasses the global, the appropriation of objects, images, and other forms of content challenges sovereignty over the cultural and economic value linked to things that emerge from particular cultural properties ranging from Aboriginal painting in Australia to the appropriation of Mao's cult of personality in 1990s China. This essay considers the most recent phase of the readymade in terms of its century-long history.

KEYWORDS

Marcel Duchamp, Readymade, Contemporary epistemology, Property, Global contemporary art

Readymades operate simultaneously as the appropriation of property and the generation of knowledge. On account of this duality, they afford a highly efficacious device for exploring postindustrial knowledge economies which are in the process of eclipsing manufacturing or extractive economies globally. Its contemporary relevance notwithstanding, however, this duality was present in readymades from the start. In Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), for instance, commentators often stress the property dimension: the artist's *choice* is identical with his (or someone else's) *purchase* of the readymade as property and the reassignment of its ownership (or authorship) to R. Mutt (or Duchamp). This shift remains within the terms of property, though it shifts the urinal, as the artwork *Fountain*, from a lumpen commodity to an aesthetic form of *intellectual property*. On the other hand, if knowledge is understood as the imposition of a stable categorization onto a thing,

then the readymade suspends the relationship between knowledge and property by superimposing two ostensibly irreconcilable statuses—urinal and sculpture—on the same material object. Instead of carrying a singular meaning then, the readymade configures several simultaneous and contradictory *claims* on meaning. We might say that the fixity of property is undone by the proliferation of cognitive *properties* attached to a single commodity. The true form of the readymade is thus not the object chosen, but rather the virtual configuration of epistemological claims it generates and/or “hosts” as projections upon it.

Duchamp’s suspension of the urinal’s meaning in *Fountain* belongs to a European avant-garde tradition of perpetual revision or revolution in the definition of artworks. In fact, we might describe the avant-garde gesture as fundamentally a *suspension of meaning* whose epistemological effects are much more powerful than any mere formal innovation. But the conditions under which the readymade operates have changed significantly since the early twentieth century. With the rise of global contemporary art, the cognitive contradictions articulated around the readymade have shifted from a set of limited—even provincial—debates regarding the definition of modern artworks, to a geopolitical realm characterized by conflicts between cultures and contradictory models of modernity with their own epistemological bases. In the paintings of the Chinese artist Wang Guangyi such as *Great Castigation Series: Coca-Cola* of 1993, a socialist realist representation of Chinese workers can function *simultaneously* as an icon of the history of the Communist revolution, or as a token of nostalgia for that lost heroic period for Chinese viewers. Or, for international audiences, it may function as an attractive form of Communist kitsch equivalent in its meaning to a commodity like Coca-Cola to which Wang has juxtaposed them. Such works open a field of competing local and global claims over appropriated content that moves well beyond the precincts of European modernism to a negotiation *between* alternate histories of modernity: the modernity of Mao’s cultural revolution, for instance, versus the modernity of Coke’s consumer revolution.

In order to describe these broad global strategies adequately, I believe it is necessary to trace a genealogy of the readymade (and its later appropriation) since Duchamp coined the term more than one hundred years ago. First, on account of its current ubiquity, I will contend that the readymade practice should be understood as a flexible “technology” rather than a punctual act of rupture (as historical readymades such as *Fountain* are often understood).

The closest modern analogy is therefore photography, which since its invention in 1839 has assumed a multiplicity of roles vis-à-vis traditional fine art media. Photography was positioned initially as a challenge to the media that preceded it (especially, in its superior mimetic capacities, to painting); as an alternative to the fine arts through its documentary and commercial manifestations; as a fine art medium in its own right, theorized according to principles of medium specificity; and finally, as the generalized tool that digital photography has become, which enters into many different types of artworks without being categorized in narrow terms of medium as art photography. Similarly, understood as a technology, the readymade and appropriation have shifted in their functions, while becoming as common as photography as a tool in global contemporary art. I will propose three dimensions of readymade practice, tracing them through the Euro-American canon in anticipation of their widespread globalization in the 90s.² They include: the readymade's *ontological* challenges to artworks through its equation of commodity and art object; the *semantic* deployment of readymades as lexical elements within artworks, and a third *cultural* dimension, which most directly encompasses the global, wherein appropriated objects and images, generate a pattern of claims and counter-claims on the meaning of cultural property. In actuality, as has been apparent in my discussion of *Fountain*, these three dimensions are all present in the readymade from the beginning, but have had varying relevance at different historical moments and in different geopolitical contexts. In short, in the course of its century-long history, the readymade has established varying ratios between knowledge and property.

Thierry de Duve has influentially argued that in equating artworks with commodities Duchamp's readymades provoked a shift from the conventional aesthetic question, "Is it beautiful?" to an ontological challenge: "Is it art?"³ The readymade suggests that any thing may function as an artwork if, for instance, an artist chose it, or a gallery or museum exhibits it. While such a fundamental rethinking of art's definition has had an enormous historical and philosophical legacy, its disruptive force quickly wanes after the initial shock. By now, most participants in the art world, including large sections of the general public, have adopted a very permissive definition of artworks, which fully accepts appropriated content as legitimate. But the disruptive moment is only the first step in the readymade's operations. While the controversy surrounding *Fountain* did of course begin with a refusal by the jury of the New York Independents exhibition of 1917 to ratify the work as art⁴, in the face

of this refusal, Duchamp countered *Fountain's* failed application and subsequent physical disappearance with a sustained “publicity” effort, spanning decades, whose purpose was to keep the work alive through gossip, publication, reenactment, and refabrication. Given the fact that this work is now an icon of modern art, such efforts must be considered a brilliant success. Duchamp’s readymades thus explore two sides of modern art’s ontological condition both as property and as knowledge: the artwork’s vulnerability as matter susceptible to time is opposed to the necessity of sustaining it through discourse. In other words, the standard account of the readymade—as a form of negation accomplished by equating an art object with an ordinary commodity—is only the first step in its operations, which in a subsequent moment calls forth a profuse spectacularization of the work in order to keep its image alive or, as De Duve has it, to put it “on the record” in the realm of knowledge.

It is this latter dynamic of publicity—or discourse—that opens onto the second *semantic* modality of the readymade in which commodities function as the ideologically rich language of consumer society. Robert Rauschenberg’s *Rebus* (1955) signals in its title what I mean by a semantic use of readymades, for a rebus is a sentence composed of pictures or objects—in this case readymade pictures drawn from various print sources. While such a grammar of appropriated elements was already present in Hannah Höch’s pioneering photomontages from 1919 onward, as well as in Meret Oppenheim’s or Salvador Dalí’s Surrealist objects of the mid-1930s, it was at the mid-twentieth century, and especially in Pop art, that a strategy of incorporating or reproducing commercial objects as potent symbols as opposed to generic commodities, became widespread. In Andy Warhol’s work, for instance, the Campbell’s soup can or Coca-Cola bottle function as emblems of American Cold War economic power, possessing and even flaunting, qualities of consumer abundance through their repetition. In other words, their value as knowledge—or ideology—significantly overshadows their value as property. Warhol himself gave a brilliant, if deadpan, retrospective account of Coke’s supposed egalitarianism:

What’s great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking.⁵

The same Coca-Cola that Warhol celebrates for its ideology of egalitarianism from an American perspective was recognized and critiqued as an *imperialist* ideology by the Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles. In his *Insertion into Ideological Circuits* of 1970, Meireles transferred brief messages regarding political arrests or disappearances under the Brazilian dictatorship, as well as the slogan “YANKEES GO HOME!” onto Coke bottles in the process of being recycled back into circulation through the prevailing deposit system in Brazil where used bottles are cleaned, refilled, and returned to the market. Because Meireles’s texts were inserted as though they were part of the bottle’s packaging, they were encountered outside of official art institutions by unsuspecting consumers seeking no more than to enjoy a bottle of Coke. Thus, while Duchamp’s readymades came into being by entering into the institutions of art, Meireles’s found an audience by returning to the circuits of ordinary commodities.

The Coke bottle is simultaneously an advertisement for American commercial dominance and a political icon for those U.S. policies in Brazil and Latin America more broadly that abetted the repressive dictatorships there (as indicated by the texts that Meireles applies to bottles). A diagram of geopolitical power thus intersects—and interferes—with the circulation of a global brand. Ideology—which after all is a form of knowledge—engulfs property.

Such questions of *cultural property* emerge in a different, more global fashion in the 1980s debates around appropriation in Australia, which exemplify the third or global stage of the readymade/appropriation. These complex debates were contentiously inter-cultural, arising from the encounter of different models of Aboriginal and Euro-Australian knowledge as well as differential positioning between a self-consciously “provincial” Australia and European or American art center. We can identify three broad positions that describe a field of diverse sovereign claims at stake in these debates.

I. ABORIGINAL ARTISTS “APPROPRIATE” THEIR OWN HERITAGE.

The inalienable rights of Aboriginal people to their ceremonial stories of the Dreaming (to which individual artists may claim access during their lifetimes) were made alienable and sold in the form of the Aboriginal Papunya acrylic dot painting that emerged in the 1970s, as well as subsequent related practices. In this work sacred signs or configurations that should be accessible only to initiates were amended to allow them to enter Anglo-Australian and global art markets without committing a transgression. Once

in circulation there, the abstraction of these paintings made them vulnerable to appropriation by Western aesthetic discourses, consequently diluting the cultural roots of the forms represented, or submerging them altogether within global Eurocentric art discourses. Aboriginal artists' awareness and careful negotiation of the inalienable and alienable dimensions of ceremonial forms, as well as the differing contexts for their commercial and critical reception has been recognized as a knowing appropriation of traditional knowledge. Eric Michaels for instance, asserts the innovation involved in translating performative ritual traditions into contemporary painting: "These often old men and women, comparatively isolated in remote sites, have invented an art form partly by appropriating contemporary western technology and aesthetics, and I find it remarkable that they are denied full credit for extraordinary accomplishment."⁶ Aboriginal painting is thus simultaneously a self-appropriation (of "tradition") and an appropriation of the Other (through access to the Western tradition of abstraction)—it is a form of "property" that is deeply, if not always consensually, shared.

II. THE NATION APPROPRIATES ABORIGINAL CULTURE

The Australian government itself appropriated Aboriginal forms as nationalist symbols, disseminating them widely in such major international celebrations as the Australian Bicentennial in 1988 and the Sydney Olympics in 2000. Here Aboriginal culture is afforded broad spectacular exposure but not necessarily genuine political agency. As Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis declared in an important article of 1989, "while Aboriginal people have acquired a global platform for the display of their work, this does not constitute a platform from which to express their political aspirations."⁷ Ironically, work by Aboriginals that was once considered inauthentic because of its adoption of Western techniques and its address to a Western audience (as a kind of "tourist art") was later seized upon precisely to lend a certain authenticity to Australian culture. But if the Australian government has exploited Aboriginal art to assert its values as a multi-cultural nation-state, following the Native Title Act of 1993 counter-claims were made to Aboriginal Sovereignty over traditional lands, and in some cases art constituting the visual transcription of ceremonial forms of Dreaming, analogous to those represented in Aboriginal painting, has been adduced as the requisite proof of continuous habitation in courts of law. Again, we encounter countervailing dynamics of appropriation: attempts by the Australian state to

exploit Aboriginal heritage, and Aboriginal attempts to gain title to traditional lands through the re-deployment of an aesthetic vocabulary initially developed for circulation within the Anglo-Australian art world (and which eventually circulated globally).

III. ANGLO-AUSTRALIAN CULTURE APPROPRIATES EURO-AMERICAN CULTURE.

In the 1980s, Australia's own geographically remote position vis-à-vis Euro-American art centers led to anxiety among Euro-Australians with regard to the derivative status of their culture, as itself a copy, or appropriation of more geographically central traditions of modern and contemporary art in the Anglophone West. As Meaghan Morris has expressed it, "the modern' in Australia has only marginally been understood as entailing 'the future', 'youth', 'originality', 'innovation', rupture', 'the unknown' and so forth. 'The modern' has much more commonly been understood as a *known history*, something which has *already happened elsewhere*, and which is to be reproduced, mechanically or otherwise with a local content."⁸ Artists like Imants Tillers and others have exploited the notion of Australia as copy in their own appropriation-oriented works.

I have argued that in the *ontological* dimension, readymades generate new knowledge by suspending conventional meanings. In the *semantic* dimension, commodified material such as brands are combined into rebuses. And, finally, in the *cultural* dimension, the readymade may stage contradictory claims regarding *community* property. As a malleable practice that is analogous to photography, the readymade has remained a compelling aesthetic tactic throughout the 20th and 21st century precisely because it can manifest the different relations that knowledge establishes with and as-property. The readymade, it seems, is the work of art in the age of postindustrial production.

- 1 This essay is drawn from my book, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (forthcoming, MIT Press, 2020)
- 2 Even though they do unfold chronologically to a significant extent, these modalities also overlap one another and persist past their initial moment of relevance, so that the ontological question remains, even as questions of semantics and sovereignty emerge as more prominent. This is why I prefer to think in terms of modalities, as opposed to, for instance, phases of the readymade.
- 3 “With the readymade, however, the shift from the classical to the modern aesthetic judgment is brought into the open, as the substitution of the sentence ‘this is art’ for the sentence ‘this is beautiful.’” Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT Press, October Books, 1996), p. 302
- 4 *Fountain* was sent in anonymously, and thus without the official imprimatur of Duchamp, and rejected despite a policy admitting all works that had been properly submitted (by making an application, paying initiation fee and keeping up with membership dues). See Clark S. Manor, *The Society of Independent Artists: The Exhibition Record 1917-1944* (Park Ridge, NJ: Noyes Press, 1984)
- 5 Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1975), 100-101
- 6 Eric Michaels, “Post-Modernism, Appropriation and Western Desert Acrylics,” [1989] in Rex Butler, ed, *What is Appropriation? An anthology of critical writings on Australian art in the ‘80s and ‘90s* (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art; Sydney: Power Publications, 1996), p. 220. I am grateful to Christopher Williams-Wynn for informing me of these debates.
- 7 Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis, “Aboriginal Art: Symptom or Success?” *Ibid*, p. 207.
- 8 Meaghan Morris, “Metamorphoses at Sydney Tower,” *New Formations*, v. 11 (Summer 1990), p. 10.