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Rogue urinals

Has the art market gone Dada?



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Critics tend to declare that Marcel Duchamp's urinal, entitled "Fountain", is the most important artwork of the 20th century. Yet its standing as a collectible object has always lagged behind its value as an idea. The work questioned notions of authenticity when Duchamp first purchased the mass-produced plumbing fixture and signed it "R. Mutt" in 1917. Now, over 40 years after the artist's death, the problem of legitimacy remains relevant as unauthorised urinals have been discovered circulating in Italy. The art world loves paradoxical conceptual gestures, but it seems that someone might be taking the piss.

"Fountain" was the first ready-made that Duchamp engineered for scandal. The artist was a member of the board of the Society of Independent Artists, whose exhibition had no jury and was set to be the largest in America. He knew that most people would perceive the work as a prank, particularly if submitted by an unknown Richard Mutt from Philadelphia. When the board duly voted against it, Duchamp and his chief patron, Walter Arensberg, resigned in protest—a story that was swiftly leaked to the New York papers.

The ready-made had its public debut a few weeks later in an art magazine called the *Blind Man*. A photo of the urinal by Alfred Stieglitz was published alongside the founding manifesto of conceptual art, which included the words: "Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it." The urinal then went the way of many of Duchamp's early ready-mades; it was smashed or trashed. So insignificant was the porcelain pissoir at the time that no one can remember exactly what happened to it.

"Fountain" was not a coveted art object until well after the second world war, when Duchamp became a cult figure among Pop artists. In response to the art world's desire to see his legendary lavatory, Duchamp authorised curators to purchase urinals in his name in 1950, 1953 and 1963. (The first is in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the second is lost and the third sits in the Moderna Museet in Stockholm.) Then in 1964, in association with Arturo Schwarz, a Milan art dealer, historian and collector, the artist made the momentous decision to issue 12 replicas (an edition of eight with four proofs) of his most important ready-mades, including the urinal. Mr Schwarz, now 86, went on to write the artist's catalogue raisonné—a scholarly book meant to document the complete works of Duchamp.

As one who had painted moustaches on postcards of the Mona Lisa, Duchamp understood the power of reproductions to render a work iconic and consolidate an artist's international reputation. Indeed, nine of the 12 official Schwarz "Fountains" have been included in museum collections around the world. Of the three in private hands, one is in Bel Air, California, another is in Manhattan with the Mugar family, and the last, owned by Dimitris Daskalopoulos in Athens, will be exhibited at the Whitechapel Gallery in London this summer.

One of the many ironies of the Schwarz urinals is that they are carefully crafted earthenware sculptures modelled on the Stieglitz photo of the "original". Every edition has a story, but there is no beating the provenance of the 13th one. Dubbed "the prototype" and bearing Duchamp's signature, it slipped quietly onto the market in 1973 at the then fledgling gallery of Ronald Feldman in New York. Andy Warhol, who visited the gallery repeatedly, pressed Mr Feldman to trade the urinal for some of his own portraits. "Duchamp didn't sell well in those days," says Mr Feldman, "but Andy knew what multiples meant because he made them."

When Warhol died in 1987, his urinal was consigned to Sotheby's as part of his giant five-volume estate sale. "Fountain" was buried in a volume devoted to prints and given a lowly estimate of \$2,000-2,500. It sold for \$65,750 to Dakis Joannou, a Greek-Cypriot construction tycoon, and is now enshrined in the front hall of his main home in Athens. "I couldn't believe that we could actually own it," says Mr Joannou. "People didn't appreciate its historical importance, so we got a bargain." In the following decade, Duchamp's renown increased yet again, as did the marketing of his work. In 1999 Sotheby's put an official Schwarz urinal on the cover of its Contemporary Art evening sale catalogue; it commanded \$1.8m.

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Collectors of contemporary art are comfortable acquiring individual works in series, but they don't relish unlimited editions or dodgy authorship. Duchamp owners may be dismayed to learn that *The Economist* has discovered at least three more "Duchamp urinals". Gio di Maggio, a collector whose Fondazione Mudima is in Milan, and Luisella Zignone, a Duchamp collector based in Biella, both have "Fountains" that Mr Schwarz says he gave as gifts. Sergio Casoli, a Milan dealer, is also thought to own one. (He declined to comment.)

Mr Schwarz claims that these works were made in 1964 under Duchamp's direction, but were not included in the original edition due to "imperfections". (It is unlikely that more than 17 urinals could have survived from this edition, but only Mr Schwarz knows for sure.) None of the newly discovered pieces have the "Marcel Duchamp" signature of official ready-mades. Nevertheless, the "Fountains" owned by Mr Di Maggio and Mrs Zignone have been shown in public institutions in Basel and Buenos Aires. In interview, Mr Schwarz reluctantly confirmed that he is trying to sell a fourth "Fountain" for an undisclosed sum, which one source says is \$2.5m. (When pressed, Mr Schwarz says the asking price depends on whether the purchaser is a museum, a well-reputed collector or a speculator.)

The artist's estate is not pleased. Jacqueline Matisse Monnier, the head of the Association for the Protection and Conservation of works by Marcel Duchamp, says that "neither my mother nor I ever sanctioned the sale of unauthorised ready-mades." Mrs Monnier's mother, "Teeny", was married to Pierre Matisse, the dealer son of the Henri, before she married Duchamp, making her an heir to both the Henri Matisse and Duchamp estates. She sees Mr Schwarz's activities as curious given that "Arturo was a great friend of Marcel."

Some Duchamp connoisseurs are outraged. Francis M. Naumann, a scholar and dealer who has published widely on Duchamp, argues that these urinals cannot be considered Duchamps at all. "For Duchamp, the signature was everything," he argues. "It is the single most important element in the process of transforming an ordinary everyday object into a work of art."

Others appear more ambivalent. Daniella Luxembourg, co-owner of Luxembourg & Dayan, a New York gallery that recently held a Duchamp mini-retrospective, says the artist's market has "the atmosphere of relics in a religion," adding that "with globalisation, the differences between what was signed by Duchamp and what was in his vicinity will become smaller and smaller."

Duchamp's relationship to commerce was not naive. Although he preferred to give away his work rather than sell it, he made a living as an art dealer for many years. Duchamp was also an able chess player who could think a good few moves ahead. One wonders whether the Dada master, who challenged the notion of the authentic artwork, might not be amused by the way these questionable "Fountains" muddy the waters of his current market. "My production," he once said, "has no right to be speculated upon."