

Gender Provocation Made by Marcel Duchamp: The Case of the Reversed Fountain from 1917

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Abstract

This essay examines the gender aspects in Marcel Duchamp's conceptual oeuvre, which have long been partially or completely neglected in the Duchamp literature. The analysis focuses on the well-known readymade, called *Fountain* (1917/64), which became the symbolic object of the very beginning of the conceptual art paradigm. My hypothesis is that Duchamp's conceptual work, mixing up the logic of circular arguments with humor and irony, can be interpreted as an 'avant-la-lettre' gender provocation, confronting interpreters not only with a gender task—understanding and defining our social gender roles, tasks and desires facing the already existing possibilities given in our social surroundings—but also with an over-gender task that goes beyond the understanding of our biological endowments and given social gender roles and positions. Hence, on the one hand, this early gender provocation, carried out by the *Fountain* of Marcel Duchamp performing ironic aesthetic value judgments—modeling the structure of logical self-contradictions—encourages gender awareness; on the other hand,—by setting up premises leading to senseless conclusions—it creates a gender trap.

My argument is that the interpretation of this gender trap, modeled by the *Fountain* at the beginning of the 20th century—in the lack of an over-gender awareness—can result in reductions, denying the complexity of our human existential and co-existential roles and neglecting the over-gender roles and positions of human beings as autonomous and yet co-existentially related individuals.

Keywords: conceptual art paradigm, readymade, gender provocation, gender awareness, over-gender awareness.

The Birth of the Conceptual Art Paradigm

The French-born Marcel Duchamp (1887-1868) is considered to be a subversive person, who introduced a new paradigm in the big narrative of western art history at the beginning of the 20th century. This new paradigm called conceptual art became within a few decades a new measure of performance for artists conveying intellectual contents in their artistic productions and questioning the traditional status of the art object as unique, material, and collectible. In the conceptual art paradigm, a work of art, which in the traditional sense, inherited in the big narrative of western art history, refers primarily to itself and then to the world, from here on, it starts to refer primarily to the world, and then to itself. In this new paradigm, an artwork becomes relatively functional, submitted to the idea, just like a non-attractive sign or a seemingly transparent verbal statement. Therefore, the vehicle of conceptual art can be anything, from everyday objects to photographs and texts, because the idea transmitted by the object becomes more important than the medium itself. The classical conceptual artist substitutes the creation of a beautiful art object for the visual transmission of “a great idea.”

Although conceptual art is often compared to philosophy, it is rather a new field of cultural production, situated halfway between philosophy and visual poetry. Indeed, poetry and, especially, visual poetry was an important source of inspiration for Duchamp. When reading the visual poems of the late 19th-century French literature by Stéphane Mallarmé and Guillaume Apollinaire, the anti-representational poems, novels, and short stories by Raymond Roussel, the tautological texts by Alfred Jarry, the speculative etymologies by Jean Pierre Brisset, he said that those writers and poets would be the most appropriate to his “ideal library.”

As for philosophy, Duchamp was not an expert in philosophy, but he seemed to be very interested in some popular theories and speculations of his age. One of these was that of Gaston de Pawlowski, the author of a science fiction novel (*Journey to the Land of the Fourth Dimension/Voyage au pay de la quatrième dimension*) first published in 1911 and then in 1923, implanting the thoughts of the Einsteinian physics. He liked to refer to the popular thoughts of the logical empiricist philosophers of the Vienna Circle, arguing that “everything is tautology except for the black coffee” where the senses can gain certainty about the existence of things (Duchamp, 1977, pp. 209-210). On the basis of this theory, Duchamp developed his own language theory, which he called “pictorial nominalism,” emphasizing the “plastic existence of words,” based on “plastic meanings” and used for expressing “plastic truths” (Duchamp, 1999, p. 25).

However, if the primary task of philosophy is to understand the existence and modes of operation of things and phenomena in the world, then works of art—creating tautologies or opening different fields of meanings and playing those fields against each other—are not a traditional task of philosophy. It is rather a poetic function of communication or, as Duchamp said in an interview, it can become a source of humour as well (Duchamp, 1962, p. 83). But if humor and irony have something to do with understanding the world, our relation to the world, and to ourselves, then visual poetics and visual reflection can be connected to cultural fields conceptualizing the world. Conceptual artworks do not conceptualize the world in the way philosophy and literature do—instead, they establish a new field of expression based on the interdependence of rational and intuitive modes of cognition, verbal and visual forms of utterance, conscious and non-conscious ways of expression. This new field, called conceptual art, became a new paradigm in western art history from the 1920s onwards. As Joseph Kosuth, the founder and ideologist of the conceptual art movement stated: "All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually" (Kosuth, 1969, pp. 915–917).

Readymade–(Re)made as an Ironic Aesthetic Value Judgement

The prototypical object of conceptual art is the readymade, which is not "made ready" by the conceptual artist in a material sense, but—as an *objet trouvé*—it is found by him, and it is conceptually remade or reconceptualized by him. The term "readymade" first used by Marcel Duchamp, seems to refer to a three-dimensional industrial object made by a machine based on the plans of an unknown engineer or industrial designer. But in this context, a simple industrial *objet trouvé* becomes the vehicle of meanings, thus revealing the intellectual dimensions of art—called the fourth dimension by Duchamp—and at the same time it shows, how "meaning-making" can be a personal and personalizing gesture on the one hand, and on the other, it ironically reveals how "meaning-fabrication" can become a ridiculously pointless, and never-ending story—the latter is more readily the lesson of his Opus Magnum, *The Large Glass* realized between 1915–23. The object chosen, selected, and appropriated by the conceptual artist is a personalizing gesture. Choosing only one of the million similar objects from the conveyor belt of the awakening consumer society means on the one hand, the affirmation of the choosing self, on the other hand, a reflection on a crucial change in the object culture, which was based on handicraft until this period, and from now on, it becomes subject to mechanical mass production.

Interestingly, the spread of mass production and photographic reproduction took place

at nearly the same time, raising some similarly troubling questions in several artists and thinkers. At the beginning of the 20th century, and especially in the 1920s and 1930s, this problem was also thematized by some, particularly sensitive and responsive artists such as the Hungarian László Moholy-Nagy, photographer, painter, and master teacher at the Bauhaus School, and by the German Walter Benjamin, philosopher of art and literary critic. Moholy-Nagy created photographic pictures with the exclusion of the camera—called photograms—and thus returned the missing immediacy and personification of the mechanical reproductions to the creative process, the problem that Walter Benjamin complained about in his well-known essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin, 1935).

Marcel Duchamp, contemporary of Benjamin and Moholy-Nagy, with the personalizing gestures of everyday objects, like a urinary bought in a sanitary ware shop in New York at the beginning of the 20th century and exhibited later as an artwork, also seemed to respond to the problems formulated by Benjamin's 'mechanical reproduction' essay. He did it with an ironic attitude, thereby the readymade can be conceived as an ironic aesthetic value judgment.

Before elaborating this idea more in detail, I consider it necessary to review the most typical interpretations of the readymade and some important statements and definitions of its reception history.

The numerous attempts to define Duchamp's readymades have revolved around three main concepts. Below we seek to present these through the ideas of three prestigious interpreters: Octavio Paz, Thierry de Duve, and Arthur C. Danto.

One approach—which is, among others, the starting point for Danto—is defining a readymade as a thing or object which has gone through a metamorphosis. In this sense, a readymade which turned from a "mere real object" into a work of art performed a miracle of transforming a simple, everyday object of commonplace existence into a real work of art. As he states in the preface of his book, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*: "(...) as a matter of art-historical precedent, who first performed the subtle miracle of transforming, into works of art, objects, from the Lebenswelt of commonplace existence: a grooming comb, a bottle rack, a bicycle wheel, a urinal" (Danto, 1981, p. 6).

Another definition suggests that readymades are not to be interpreted in themselves but as signs or references behind which one may suggest the artist's gesture or intention. According to Octavio Paz, for instance, readymades (in plural) are signs of questioning and negating artworks (Paz, 1978, p. 20).

A third approach represented by Thierry de Duve states that the readymade is neither an object nor a group of objects, nor the artist's gesture or intention but a statement (énoncé) attached to any object: "this is art" (Duve, 1989. pp. 7-65).

Beside interpreting readymade as an object, a sign, or a statement, a recurring question remains for the three cited authors—and interpreters in general—whether readymades are works of art.

According to Paz, readymades are neither art nor anti-art but something indifferent, as their interest is not plastic but rather critical and philosophical (Paz, 1990, p. 20).

Thierry de Duve thinks a readymade, in the traditional sense of the word (according to the former paradigm of art), is not a work of art but an artifact of a piece of artwork, an artificial work of art on a second level. It is not simply art, nor art for art, but art about art, or in a French term, "art á propos de l'art" (Duve. 1989, p. 15). However, from the '80s and '90s on—as pointed out also by de Duve—it has been evident to almost all interpreters that readymades belong to the art field.

Danto, in whose art philosophy indiscernibility is a central question, i.e., whether one can differentiate between objects which look identical (meaning which one is a work of art and which one is not), comes to the conclusion that an object can only be seen as a work of art in the context of interpretation. The interpretation is the lever—states Danto—that takes an object of the real world up to the art world, where it may take an unexpected guise. Readymades, which he calls commonplaces, were, in this sense, originally no artworks, but with the time elapsed, in the context of interpretation, they became artworks. The act of artistic identification, which elevates the mere thing into the Realm of Art, creates in Danto's views also an ontological difference between common objects and works of art (Danto, 1997, p. 53).

All three concepts—whether they interpret readymades as an individual or collective objects—suggest that one of their essential characteristics is precisely the ontological uncertainty that keeps readymades on the borderline of art and non-art, thus making it possible and even necessary to reflect on art as a changing concept.

The relation between the context of interpretation and the judgment of whether readymades are works of art is also indicated by their consecutiveness. In 1978 Octavio Paz sees the relation between artwork and anti-artwork as a two-way, back-and-forth movement, a movement between statement and negation, and emphasizes the inherent uncertainty (Paz, 1990). However, subsequent studies by Danto and de Duve indicate that the situation changed somewhat in the '80s and '90s. From then on readymades seem to be less attracted to the pole of non-art than that of art. In other words, the movement has taken a direction: readymades have been interpreted more and more as works of art or works of art reflecting on art.

To be able to interpret readymades as works of art, as mentioned by de Duve, the paradigm shift within the medium of art was unquestionably also necessary (Duve, 1989, p. 11). Thus, it became possible to consider something a work of art, which would not have been considered a work of art a hundred years ago.

So, the movement is two-fold and parallel. While the interpretive field depending on up-to-date art concepts and definitions gradually accepts readymades, the interpretive field itself and the meaning of readymade are also changing. For the artistic field surpassing the artwork—as emphasized by Bourdieu who introduced the term field—is itself a product of constant historical and social changes, as, according to him, artistic autonomy and taste cannot be considered as separate from socio-cultural determinants.

At each moment in time, in any field of struggle whatsoever (the whole social field, field of power, field of cultural production, literary field, etc.), agents and institutions engaged in the game are simultaneously contemporaries and temporally discordant. The *field of the present* is merely another name for the field of struggle (as shown by the fact that an author of the past is present to the exact extent that he is still at stake). Contemporaneity as presence in the same present only exists in practice in the struggle that synchronizes discordant times or, rather, agents and institutions separated by time and in relation to time. (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 158)

Duchamp's readymades, which became "artworks" in the soil fertilized by avant-garde movements, hence having started out with a delay, from the context of modern art, really owe their success story to this very change. Readymades managed to be interpreted as artworks in a context of art and art theory (the '80s and '90s) when theories and ideas on the modern episteme had been accepted. That is when the interpretive field was ready to interpret Duchamp's readymades not only as a provocation despite their uninteresting visual appearance.

In this context well soaked in theory, it was no surprise that a so-called missing object (for the first version was lost) no longer existing in its original form, Duchamp's urinal entitled *Fountain* (1917), managed to become one of the most controversial modern (and later postmodern or contemporary) works of art.

On the other hand, the "subtle miracle" performed by the readymades and the "transfiguration" mentioned by Danto (Danto, 1981, p. 6), do not seem to be so mystical and incomprehensible as one may suggest based on the expressions above. The process of readymades becoming artworks and being prepared and interpreted as works of art takes place in rather calculated and identifiable moves, made partly by Duchamp and partly by "players" of the interpretive field (interpreters, critics, art dealers, and audience).

In other words, the readymade becoming a delayed work of art can be considered a long process, which does not start with exhibiting the object, but it does not end there either. It starts with Duchamp's careful preparatory work and continues with the perception history following the exhibition of the object. And it goes on until the canonization as work (or works) of art.

Below we seek to go through this process in a time frame of about half a century by touching upon the main stages of Duchamp's reception in terms of readymades and also highlighting the ideas on which the canonization of Duchamp's readymade—completed by the end of the 20th century—was built. Then we will return to the ontological dilemmas raised by readymades and seek to outline from the perspective of the ideas above what readymades really are.

The shift in the approach concerning readymade can be summarised along the following boundary points:

1. From the early 1910s to the early 1960s: Duchamp is an artist personality known and worshipped by his friends and acquaintances (e.g., Apollinaire, Breton, H-P. Roché); his readymades and all other activities only serve to support his own excellence. A prime example for that is Breton calling Duchamp "one of the most intelligent and hence, (to many) the most disturbing people of the 20th century" (Breton, 1966, p. 355). However, during this period only a few people beyond the personal circle know Duchamp and even fewer know the readymades.
2. The 1960s and '70s. In the milieu defining the theoretical inquiry of the era, the main focus is—with only a few exceptions—on the masterpiece *The Large Glass*, or more precisely on finding the meaning of the Glass. There is still not much talk about

readymades. This period launches an intensive series of interpretation and reception among artists and theorists alike that, despite its temporary extremities, paved the way for the construction of a complex image of Duchamp. A lot of interpretations came to light that later became dominant (J. Clair, O. Paz, J.-F. Lyotard, etc.). Although it was still to be determined whether Duchamp was an artist or anti-artist, sooner or later, he was going to be canonized as one of the most significant participants of the 20th-century art world, comparable in importance to Picasso.

3. Since the late 1970s and mainly from the '80s and '90s researchers have laid more and more emphasis on the significance of readymades in art theory. The time elapsed has enabled some art historians with the necessary theoretical competence (such as Thierry de Duve) to see Duchamp as the creator of a new artistic paradigm as somebody who represents thinking about art and its co-concepts. The Duchamp oeuvre canonized this way becomes a basic reference for art theory (A. C. Danto, Jean-Luc Nancy, P. Bourdieu) and theory of art history (H. Belting, G. Didi-Huberman) discussions about the nature and social position of 20th-century art and its offspring, the so-called contemporary art.

In my view, one of the most interesting features of readymades is that they give us an account of a relation to the world that mattered to him as an ironic subject. In this respect, the objects embody the intellectual prints of the artist—as explained in detail in the relevant chapters of my book on Duchamp (Házás, 2009, pp. 102-121.) They can also be considered parts of an oeuvre concept or parts of a narrative in which the objects with the notes attached to them and the comments about them outline a certain world view. This world view is based on the ironic—or as Duchamp calls it—the “affirmative ironic” relation, in which not only the duality of negation and affirmation is present (as in irony in general) but also the defeat of affirmation over negation.

However, as in the history of western aesthetics and rhetoric, the irony was considered a linguistic formation and/or a linguistic-rhetorical manifestation, the fact that Duchamp—following the footsteps of Socrates, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard (Lyotard 1977, pp. 49-50)—conveyed irony with objects can be regarded as an innovation in itself. It is what Breton saw in Duchamp when he called him “one of the most intelligent people in the early 20th century” in *The Anthology of Black Humour* (Breton, 1966, p. 355).

To express irony, it is necessary to have the characteristically Duchampian titles full of ambiguity and puns, creating a sense of split, duality, and temporality so typical for irony (Man, 1996, pp. 187-228). On the other hand, it was also necessary to have the great narrative of western art history according to which the ironic statement could be worded.

Based on the above-mentioned, we can say that in this system readymades can function as statements—as de Duve revealed (Duve, 1984). However, as they are ironic statements stating something about works of art and art within the artistic field, the introduction of readymades as a genre can be interpreted as ironic aesthetic value judgments about art and works of art depriving the statement of its very clarity, and thus of its judging nature.

Based on all this, it is not surprising at all that readymades achieved considerable theoretical success in the realm of modern and postmodern art philosophy, which do not necessarily prefer obvious answers, and especially in contemporary art and art theory.

What Is a “Gender Trap” for and how to Avoid it?

When we look at Duchamp’s more important works, it is not at all far-fetched to state that one of the central ideas in his oeuvre is man-woman relation, entering into its details, its variations and its differentiated problematization. By that, we do not only mean the obvious prints depicting genitals such as *Female Fig Leaf (Feuille de vigne femelle, 1950)* shaping female genitals and breasts, the breast-shaped statuette *Please Touch (Priere de Toucher, 1947)*, or the phallus entitled *Dart Object (Objet-Dard, 1951)*. The topic of the sexes also comes up in other works of his, such as early paintings and drawings, or his masterpiece *The Large Glass (1915-23)*, in *L.H.O.O.Q. (1919)*, a *Mona Lisa with a mustache*, or in the readymade labeled *The Air of Paris (L’aire de Paris, 1919)*. It surfaces even in his various conceptual photos, such as J. Wasser’s photo of the chess performance made at a 1963 exhibition where a clothed Duchamp played chess with an anonymous naked woman with *The Large Glass* in the background, or in his *Cine-Sketch: Adam and Eve* in which Duchamp appears as Adam.

And last but not least, let us include the central subject of the present study, which is probably the most commented object of the 20th-century art theory. It is an everyday object, “original” dating of which in 1917 was lost, and which Duchamp replaced with a seemingly identical object in 1964: the urinal turned upside down, entitled *Fountain*, which we will scrutinize below from the perspective of the contemporary discussion revolving around social and biological gender roles and positions.

However, for a long time, the reception history of readymades either completely ignored gender-related questions or they were only marginally represented. But for a few exceptions authors did not deal with gender issues, or if they did, they relied on popular cultural schemes often neglecting the unique, Duchampian interpretation. A typical example for that is André Breton’s simplifying and—without any doubt markedly

male-centered-reading, which launched a long series of interpretations. Breton judges Duchamp's apparent masterpiece, *The Large Glass* as a mechanistic, cynical interpretation of the phenomenon of love (Breton, 1969). In the range of interpretations on the relation of Duchamp and gender, those of Arturo Swartz (Schwarz, 1997) and Octavio Paz (Paz, 1990) are less simplifying; however, they totally ignore the dialogue between the works and the spirit of the era. The profound studies by Jean Clair and Georges Didi-Huberman (Didi-Huberman, 1997) on research about the spirit of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the gender issue from a culture-historical perspective, however, analyze the works thematizing the male-female issue but exclude the feminist movements themselves and their impact on the spirit of the age from their point of view, thus, considering gender relation a timeless, eternal and constant issue, which Duchamp on the other hand, examined apparently from the perspective of here and now (or there and then).

The questions were first examined thematically by Amelia Jones in her book *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* published in 1994. Besides analyzing the works professedly as a feminist art historian, she scrutinized Duchamp's author-function and stated that Duchamp rebelling against "the phallus of artistic authority" became, paradoxically, a kind of a "father figure" for the American postmodern authors (artists, critics, and art historians) protesting against the masculinist ideologies of the Greenbergian modernism (Jones, 1994). The fact that starting with the '60s and '70s Duchamp became a substitutive "father figure" for art interpreters could be explained by Gizella Horváth's notion of vacancy aesthetics. She introduces the term in her book as a comprehensive theoretical principle of modern art which in her view as well starts with the story of Duchamp's urinal (Horváth, 2016, p. 17). According to Horvath's theory, derived from the lack of the Kantian notion of beauty, vacancy is the foundation of the modern paradigm, as it is a constitutive element of modern works of art (Horváth, 2016, pp. 19-20).

The urinal which Duchamp bought in a sanitary ware shop at the dawn of consumer society, in the early 20th century in New York, labeled it with the name of the shopkeeper (R. Mutt), and the year (1917) and then sent it to an exhibition where Duchamp himself was one of the jurors. However, as the members of the jury did not accept the urinal as an exhibit, he went on trying. He asked his friend, Alfred Steiglitz, the famous photographer, to take a photo of the object. Steiglitz's photo of the urinal was published in the avant-garde New York journal *The Blind Man*, which was edited by Duchamp and his friends. The journal published it as "the exhibit" declined at the Exhibition of Independent Artists.

All this took place at the time of the suffragette movements when civil rights movements demanding equal rights for women were thriving. There was a mushrooming for women's organization forums and the news—especially in women's newspapers—featured heroic stories about “the first woman to...” on an everyday basis (Albistur and Armogathe, 1977, pp. 339-401).

In a sense, *Fountain* was also such a vacancy-work, where vacancy is not only a capacity but also a trap. Like many other readymades, *Fountain* also draws attention to apparent contradictions and the resulting trap situations. Such a trap situation is one of the central topics in the increasingly popular gender philosophies of today: the issue of the relationship between biological and social gender. The issue, which has often been simplified and politicized since the beginning of the twenty-first century, has been circulating in public discourse as a “gender ideology”, subordinated to a battle of values between different lifestyles.

How our biological and social gender roles relate to each other, and how individual identity constructs can relate to role constructs in society—were the questions that Duchamp found highly intriguing in a culture-historical era when differentiation of gender roles and role patterns had already begun but the theories underlying the understanding of the social phenomenon had not yet been born. It means that well before Simone de Beauvoir's influential book, *The Second Sex*, was published in 1949, and before the apotheosis of its frequently quoted and even more frequently commented sentence: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir, 1949, Tome 2, p. 13) Duchamp had provoked his audience into gender consciousness before the social field of gender philosophies emerged and the description of such a concept was introduced.

On this basis, from a perspective of nearly a hundred years, we can say that many of Duchamp's works were avant-la-lettre gender provocation, as they did not only direct attention to one of the most rapidly changing areas of the western culture but also pointed out the contradictions underlying the changes.

For readymades conceived in the 1910s and '20s, around the creation of *Large Glass*, are also objects highlighting the dynamics of permanence and changes. The first readymade, for instance, *The Bicycle Wheel* attached on a stand upside down from 1913 (whose original was also lost), on the one hand, conveyed ideas of movement, changes, and pantha rhei by Heraclitus, and on the other hand, it also conveyed the human desire to freeze and fix change; all this in its own contradiction.

Fountain, the urinal, taken from its use and turned sideways, can be considered a prime example of a male object. A urinal is designed and made for men only because women cannot use it without inconvenience. It is an object connected to the biological level of a man's existence. Seemingly, it has nothing to do with gender roles. However, as Pierre Bourdieu states in his book *Masculine Domination* introducing the term paradox of doxa, these two levels are very hard to separate. Accordingly, masculinity, as a relation, is constituted paradoxically in society, the worldview that ranks the sexes institutes the phallus, which is constituted as the symbol of masculinity, and constructs from their biological differences genders as two hierarchized social essences:

For the paradox is that it is the visible differences between the female body and the male body which, being perceived and constructed according to the practical schemes of the androcentric worldview, become the most perfectly indisputable guarantee of meanings and values that are in harmony with the principles of that worldview: it is not the phallus (or its absence) which is the basis of that worldview, rather it is that worldview which, being organized according to the division into relational genders, male and female, can institute the phallus, constituted as the symbol of virility, of the specifically male point of honour (nif), and the difference between biological bodies as objective foundations of the difference between the sexes, in the sense of genders constructed as two hierarchized social essences. Far from the necessities of biological reproduction determining the symbolic organization of the sexual division of labour and, ultimately, of the whole natural and social order, it is an arbitrary construction of the male and female body, of its uses and functions, especially in biological reproduction, which gives an apparently natural foundation to the androcentric view of the division of sexual labour and the sexual division of labour and so of the whole cosmos. The particular strength of the masculine sociodicy comes from the fact that it combines and condenses two operations: it legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself a naturalized social construction. (Bourdieu, 2001, pp. 22-23)

And he does that on the one hand, regarding other men, and on the other hand, regarding the other sex (here women). The difference in viewpoints—as Duchamp also emphasized in his notes written about "changing viewpoints" (Duchamp, 1994, pp. 191-192)—largely defines the attitudes and interpretations.

The object entitled *Fountain* does not state or negate anything apart from itself, it merely separates, highlights, deprives or makes things incomplete and turns things around. With its contradiction, it provokes questions. Can we separate our biological and social

gender roles from social norms and stereotypical role patterns? And can we separate our biological and social roles that belong to our own gender? And if we can, do we do all that compared to whom or what? Who or what is the other one that we relate ourselves to? Is our biological and social gender identity a part of our identity construct? How similar and how different are we as women and men? What is the origin of our similarities and differences, and how do they relate to each other? How do we see each other and ourselves in this relation? To what extent is this relationship a part of our individual and cultural identity?

In this sense, the interpretation of Duchamp's works can really be considered an opportunity or even a challenge or a philosophical riddle, which, according to the logic of Zen-Buddhist koans, does not provide an answer to the question. One can only find an answer to these riddles in one's own life, going down the road of self-knowledge and world-knowledge based on one's own experience, overcoming one's own traps. And by answering one's own questions one can ideally form an own inner balance also adapting to one's own changes.

A probably necessary but not always sufficient condition towards that is one's own awareness of one's biological and social gender roles and their affirmation on a social level. Reflecting on Duchamp's early gender provocations, one could say that there is something here that one should not avoid, something that is beyond one's awareness-raising processes about gender roles. Something that is getting harder and harder to avoid, as reflected by the narratives of popular culture and the increasing number of theses on gender theories. Perhaps that something is none other than the riddle also suggested by the readymade *Fountain*:

What is it that is beyond our similarities but within our differences?

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