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the schlock of the new: badiou, duchamp, and the everyday miracle

alex ling

It is hard not to recognize—as many commentators have¹—the striking homology between Alain Badiou’s theory of the event and the fate of Marcel Duchamp’s infamous 1917 ‘readymade’ *Fountain*. The congruence is in fact so marked that one of the easiest ways of grasping this key philosophical concept is simply by comparing it to *Fountain*’s simultaneously mundane and extraordinary story. Yet arguably the most important lesson to be drawn from this exercise is also the one that is most often ignored; to wit, far from presenting an unbridgeable divide, there in fact exists a paradoxical *relation of continuity* between the ‘event’ and the ‘everyday’. This article seeks to redress this critical oversight by using *Fountain* not only to ‘flesh out’ Badiou’s crucial concept but also to explore the frequently overlooked (but no less necessary) imbrication of the everyday *in* the event, and in this way counter claims that Badiou’s philosophy presents a straightforward or even naïve division between conservative continuity and radical rupture.

That the event should be read *through* the readymade speaks volumes about the latter’s popularity and influence. Indeed, the tale of *Fountain* is by now so familiar as to have become all-but prosaic: in 1917, Duchamp—the celebrated artist behind *Nude Descending a Staircase of 5 years* earlier—working under the pseudonym ‘Richard Mutt’, attempted to enter an industrially fabricated urinal christened *Fountain* into the exhibition of the *Society of Independent Artists* in New York. On the face of it, his artistic prank was an abject failure; not only was the urinal

refused entry into the exhibition, it was almost immediately lost (all that remains of the original ‘work’ itself is a photograph taken by Alfred Stieglitz, though Duchamp went on to create a number of ‘authentic replicas’ in the 1960s).

Even so, the exhibition—or more precisely, *non-exhibition*—of *Fountain* is generally understood to be, alongside the great inventions of cubism and abstraction, one of the defining artistic events of the 20th century. We might even go so far as to say that *Fountain*’s non-exhibition figures the paradigmatic event in the field of art; the ‘event of events’, if you will. For Duchamp’s urinal doesn’t simply introduce us to a new mode or form of artistic practice. Rather, under the name of ‘readymade’, it changes the very idea of art itself.

That this seemingly insignificant work’s brief existence has had (and continues to have) such a profound effect on the field of art signals its intimate relation to Badiou’s theory of the event, which figures something like a sudden and unpredictable break with the logic of a world (a rupture which, under the right conditions, can lead to its complete transformation). That said, we should not be misled by the terminology here: that an event *happens* does not in itself mean that the everyday world changes. To the contrary, one of the main things I want to demonstrate here, by way of an analysis of Duchamp’s readymade, is how the dialectic between the ‘everyday’ and the ‘event’ is in actual fact far more nuanced than it might at first appear. In particular, I want to use the example of *Fountain* to show how, far from being a ‘miraculous occurrence’, the event is in fact *entirely caught up in the everyday*, being (more often than not) less a revolutionary upheaval than an ‘infinitesimal subversion’ by which a miniscule, even insignificant alteration in the order of things might come to exhibit profound consequences.

APPEARING TO DISAPPEAR: THE ONTO-LOGY OF THE EVENT

It is fair to say that the event is a crucial concept in Badiou’s philosophy. Given the fact that his initial declaration that mathematics *is* ontology effectively strips philosophy of its ‘highest responsibility’ (namely, ontology itself), we could even go so far as to argue that philosophy *per se* only really kicks in at the point of the event, which Badiou himself claims constitutes “the bedrock of my entire edifice”,² and which, as we will see, fundamentally escapes mathematical (hence ontological) thought.

But what exactly *is* an event? In spite of appearances, this is not such an easy question to answer. Very roughly speaking, an event is nothing more—and equally nothing less—than a localized and unpredictable rupture with the order of things, involving the sudden arrival on the scene of a radically un-known element (an element whose address is, for complex reasons we will examine shortly, immediately universal), the consequences of which might come to affect the entire situation.

Yet in spite of its momentous effects, an event is in equal parts rare, fleeting and fragile. A puncture hole in the fabric of the world, an event, if left unattended to, is all-too quickly patched up by the forces that dominate and govern the situation, forces that Badiou terms the *state of the situation*, and which effectively establish a ‘static’ regime of repetition. That the state must immediately quash the event is a direct—and, it should be pointed out, *unintentional* (the state being for Badiou essentially a matter of structure, not conscious intent)³—consequence of the latter’s very novelty, which, in rupturing with the laws of the situation (namely, those of order and ‘stasis’), identifies itself as *illegal* and hence a threat. As such, if an event is to have any real effect then its happening must be in some way *affirmed* by an outside party. This affirmation—together with the radical possibilities it implies—constitutes the *trace* of the vanished event (generally taking the form of a pronouncement about these new possibilities: ‘x is both conceivable and achievable...’; ‘it can be that y...’), meaning that even though the laws of the situation dictate that the event itself must disappear, it nonetheless leaves behind a mark of sorts in the form of an *evental trace*.

The process of affirming (or ‘tracing’) an event is however far from a straightforward business. For as it turns out, we cannot *know*, strictly speaking, whether an event has occurred or not. The reasoning behind this is once again a little complicated, but essentially boils down to the fact that the ‘place’ in which an event takes place (namely, the evental site) is itself a point that, for structural reasons, must remain altogether unrecognized by the state (whose role it is to ‘count’ the elements of a situation, and thereby designate which elements, legally speaking, ‘count’). To this end there can be absolutely no knowledge of an event’s occurrence, for the simple reason that, in falling outside of the statist order—thus in falling outside of ‘knowledge’ *per se* (everything that is ‘known’ being fundamentally known *by the state*)—an event is thereby completely withdrawn or ‘subtracted’ from all predication. Moreover, an event’s being radically un-known means that its very happening must be, properly speaking, both *indiscernible* and *undecidable*: one can only make a ‘pure’ decision regarding its having taken place

(the ‘purity’ of this decision residing in the fact that there can be no criteria upon which to base a decision concerning the occurrence of something which is radically un-known).

So to sum up, an event illegally ‘interrupts repetition’ to introduce something new in the form of a heretofore unimaginable possibility. Its radically un-known status, however, means that its occurrence is, from the point of view of the situation (or the world) in question, both indiscernible (it cannot be recognised as such) and undecidable (it cannot be proven to have—or *have not*—taken place): with regard to deciding an event’s having-happened, as Badiou puts it, “it is given to us to bet”.⁴

Yet even though we are now in possession of an adequate working theory of the event, we still do not know what it actually *is*. That is to say, it remains to be demonstrated *ontologically*. This is however once again a tricky business, not least because, as we mentioned earlier, the event fundamentally eludes mathematical thought: strictly speaking, an event *is not*, insofar as it falls on the side of “that-which-is-not-being-*qua*-being”.⁵ Moreover, between the ontological foundations of *Being and Event* and the phenomenological investigations of *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou has in fact proposed two decidedly different conceptions of the event (as well as of various other crucial event-dependent concepts: the site, the subject, etc.), and even though we are here privileging the presentation offered in Badiou’s more recent work, there still remain substantial difficulties involved in marrying the two. Lastly, an event cannot be thought outside of its site (which provides, if only briefly, its worldly support), which itself errs on the wrong side of the laws of being and accordingly “appears only to disappear”.⁶

As such, before we can really grasp what an event *is* we must first come to terms with its *site*. So what then is a site? Put as simply as possible (and again, prioritizing the conception put forward in *Logics of Worlds*), it is a temporary aberration of the laws of ontology. Technically, a site is an object (that is, a multiple whose elements are indexed to a world’s transcendental, or a multiple that *appears* in a world)⁷ which, due to a momentary ‘kink’ in the ontological order, comes to count itself in the referential field of its own indexation. Or again, a site is something that “summons its being in the appearing of its own multiple composition”,⁸ and as such “*makes itself* appear”.⁹ All of which is to say that a site testifies to the intrusion of being *in* appearing.

Technically speaking, at the level of being, a site x proves itself paradoxical in its being a *reflexive multiple*, meaning it is an element of itself, it ‘auto-belongs’ (that is, $x \in x$).¹⁰ In its counting of itself *in itself* the site thus constitutes a supernumerary term—it is, as Badiou puts it, an ‘ultra-one’—and is as such, by dint of the axiom of foundation (which effectively prohibits a set’s belonging to itself), ontologically illegal. In transgressing the laws of being, the site must accordingly vanish. Lastly—and this really is key—in its giving its very being a value of existence, a site temporarily bridges the fissure separating ‘being’ from ‘being-there’, which is to say it involves “the instantaneous revelation of the void that haunts multiplicities”:¹¹ the site convokes or ‘brings forth’ what is void in the situation, it presents what had been altogether unrepresented (by the state); in short, it brings into existence what had previously failed to appear.

The *ontology* of the site thus consists of three fundamental (and, according to the laws of the situation, fundamentally *illegal*) points: it is a reflexive multiple; it is the revelation of the void; and it appears only to disappear.

A site’s *logic* (that is to say, its phenomenology), on the other hand, essentially involves the redistribution of the intensities of appearing around this vanished site. Of this distribution two immediate possibilities present themselves: either the intensity of existence briefly attributed to the site is maximal, in which case we are dealing with a real *singularity* (in convoking its void, the site reveals something radically new or un-known); or it is not, in which case we are merely dealing with a *fact* (the site fails to convoke the void; everything that appears is already *known*). Clearly our interest here lies with the former, which we can further divide into its strong and weak variants. Simply, while a weak singularity doubtless involves the brief (if absolute) existence of the site, only a strong singularity—that is, a singularity whose apparent *consequences* are maximal—constitutes an *event* proper.

These maximal consequences can mean one thing and one thing only, being the sudden and absolute existence of what had previously inexisted. Or to be more precise: the maximal appearance of what had formerly been the inexistent object proper to the site itself; that which constituted, ontologically speaking, the void of the situation. It is moreover in this precise sense—in its relating to the situation from the basis of the void alone—that an event can be said to immediately address itself *universally*, insofar as the void invokes only “the flat surface of indifferent multiplicity”:¹² in constituting the “absolute neutrality of being”, which is the single ‘characteristic’ common to everything (given that everything *is*), the

void “neither excludes nor constrains anyone.”¹³

Considered as a site *in extremis*, an event (or a ‘strong singularity’) thus essentially effects something of an existential inversion, apportioning a maximal intensity of existence to that which had previously failed to exist at all. Further, since the event-site ‘appears only to disappear’, this absolutely existing former inexistent represents the sole testimony to the event’s having-happened, which is to say it is the very *trace* of the event, its lingering consequence. Thus Badiou can succinctly describe the event as equally “a pure cut in becoming made by an object of the world ... [and] the supplementing of appearing through the upsurge of a trace: the old inexistent which has become an intense existence”.¹⁴

This trace is however not logically inconsequential. Indeed, existentially speaking, every event involves a real life and death struggle. For a world’s regime of appearing—each and every object of a world falling under the jurisdiction of its transcendental ordering structure¹⁵—demands both a maximum and a minimum, and the forfeiture of either one of these positions requires that something else must take its place. Or again, if a world’s minimally existing object suddenly becomes maximally apparent, this means another object is required to fill the vacuum that it leaves. The logic of the event thus accedes to Picasso’s famous declaration that “every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction”, on the proviso that the key terms are reversed: while creation and destruction are indeed necessary correspondents, it is creation that comes first, each and every time.

DUCHAMP’S CREATIVE ACT

Returning now to Duchamp’s infamous urinal, given the necessarily ‘novel’ nature of the event, one might immediately object to classifying *Fountain* as an event at all—let alone as the ‘event of events’ in the artistic field—on the grounds that Duchamp had already created numerous readymades beforehand (1913’s *Bicycle Wheel* and 1914’s *Bottle Rack*, for example). To do so however would be to ignore the essential *situatedness* of the event: of all of Duchamp’s readymades, *Fountain* constitutes the event proper due to the simple fact that it was the first to be ‘exhibited’, and thus the first to appear in the situation (or the world) of art (even if this exhibition was, in truth, a *non-exhibition*).¹⁶

In fact, as Barbara Formis has already in large part demonstrated, to categorize the readymade—or more precisely, the initial 1917 (non)exhibition of *Fountain*—

as an ‘event’ is a fairly straightforward, even excessively neat exercise.¹⁷ For one thing, like the event, the readymade emerges in the situation at a very specific point, namely, a point that is radically *unpresented*; what Badiou, in the language of *Being and Event*, calls the ‘edge of the void’, or the situational *site*. Furthermore, it has an ‘exceptional’ structure that leads to its being designated illegitimate or *illegal* by the laws that govern the situation (viz., the ‘state’ of the situation; in this case the artistic cognoscenti of the *Society of Independent Artists*). This illegality means, in turn, that its emergence in the situation is followed by its immediate prohibition or censure by the state, meaning its appearance effectively coincides with its *disappearance*. Of course, this illegitimacy and unprecedentedness equally means that there are no established criteria upon which to ‘judge’ the work (or alternatively, there are no coordinates by which the work might be ‘positioned’ and hence comprehended), meaning that, for all intents and purposes, it appears in the situation—at least initially—as absolutely *abstract*, as singularly unfathomable. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, its momentary appearance ultimately leads, through at times slow and arduous means, to a wholesale *transformation* of the situation out of which it arises, namely, the world of art.

Thus we already have at hand five major ways by which *Fountain*’s non-exhibition can be categorized as an event: it emerges from an evental site; it is illegal according to the ‘laws’ of the situation; it appears only to disappear; it is incomprehensible according to the logic of the state; and it results in the total transformation of the situation whence it emerged.

More than this, the ‘readymade-event’—which, just to be perfectly clear, designates the *non-exhibition* of *Fountain* (as opposed to the work itself)—is paradigmatic in the field of art because its effects are felt first and foremost at an *ontological* level, that is, it involves the ‘being’, or the very ‘essence’, of art.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. It is first important to point out how the *Society of Independent Artists*—of which Duchamp was a founding member—had, in the lead up to its exhibition, taken great care to publicly establish its independence from what we might call the ‘state of art’. Its slogan, after all, was ‘no jury, no prizes’—a motto apparently suggested by none other than Duchamp himself¹⁸—while Article 2 of the *Society*’s regulations stated words to the effect that anybody who was able to cough up six dollars (the price of membership in the society) was able—indeed, *obliged*—to exhibit a work in the show.

So when Duchamp's attempt to enter his industrially fabricated urinal into the exhibition proved unsuccessful, this immediately gave the lie to both the *Society's* 'avant-garde' credentials and, more importantly, its supposed 'independence', inasmuch as *Fountain*—or, more specifically, *Fountain's rejection*, its 'illegality' in the eyes of the state—made the jury's hidden presence only too explicit. As Duchamp's friend and contemporary Louise Norton declared at the time, "many of us had quite an exorbitant notion of the independence of the Independents. It was a sad surprise to learn of a Board of Censors sitting upon the ambiguous question, What is ART?"¹⁹ Thus the work's refusal clearly contradicted the 'democratic' claim of the exhibition and revealed the *Society's* underlying conformity with, and lack of genuine independence from, the very institutions that represent the 'state of art'.

The *Society's* complicity with the state was only made even more explicit in the 'official' reasons given for the urinal's refusal, namely: that the object was not fabricated by the artist; and that the object was not in fact an original work at all. In other words, for an object to be accepted as a work of art in the situation 'the world of art in 1917', it had to fulfil two basic functions: first, it had to be physically *constructed* by the artist (i.e. it could not be manufactured by an external agent); and second, it had to be *unique* (that is, it must not be, *pace* Walter Benjamin, a copy of a previously existing object). Needless to say, under these conditions, the readymade could in no way have been accepted as an artwork, by the *Society* or by the state of art more broadly: as a reproduced industrial (and, in this sense, utterly *impersonal*) object—Duchamp himself holding that one of the crucial 'features' of the readymade was in fact "its lack of uniqueness"²⁰—*Fountain* fails miserably on each and every count. Were the readymade to be accepted *as art*, then the very definition of art would be rendered obsolete.

And yet, as is well known, over the next half-century, *this is precisely what happened*. For far from disqualifying this non-exhibited urinal *as art*, the readymade-event comes much closer to disqualifying art *tout court*. Indeed, as Duchamp's biographer Calvin Tomkins (somewhat hyperbolically) states, the ultimate aim of his readymades was nothing less than "to deny the *possibility* of defining art."²¹

Moreover, it is for precisely this reason that *Fountain's* effects must be understood as being ontological in nature, insofar as they reveal something about the very 'essence' of art: not of one specific art form (such as painting or sculpture) but rather of *art as a whole*. Because what this work reveals is that all of the elements

that go into making an artwork—all of those base elements which, while absolutely present (as its material substrate), nevertheless fail to be *re-presented* in the completed ‘work of art’—are themselves, in a very real sense, *readymade objects*. This is, after all, Duchamp’s fundamental point: the readymade lays claim to being a work of art for a very simple reason, which is that, at an ontological level (i.e. at the level of its *being*), *all art is necessarily readymade*. Or again, there is no art that is not, in some essential way, always-already readymade.²²

In being ‘elevated’ to the level of art, the readymade thus reveals an important, if ambiguous truth about art itself, namely, that works of art require ordinary everyday objects in order to exist. Or to put it in more Badiouian terms, the readymade-event clearly demonstrates the *indiscernibility between art and non-art*, an acknowledgement that the base material of art is, first and foremost, *non-artistic*.

The ‘evental’ status of *Fountain* therefore lies foremost in the fact that it managed (metaontologically speaking) to elevate certain voided—and, fundamentally, *common*—elements from the level of *non-presentation* to that of *re-presentation*, or (on a phenomenological level) to raise that which had *inexisted* in art to a level of *maximal existence*.

INAESTHETICS: ART AND PHILOSOPHY

It is at this point—as we consider the complicated relation of art to *what-it-is-not*—that we might ask ourselves exactly what art means for Badiou. The first thing to note here is that, according to Badiou, whilst philosophy has an absolute need for art (being one of its structural conditions), art can itself easily make do without philosophy. This one-sided relationship is of course one of the principal reasons behind his rejection of traditional aesthetics—which he sees as solely concerned with establishing rules and hierarchies of ‘taste’—in favour of an approach to art that limits its interest to the manner by which art effectively *thinks for itself*, and thus might come to affect philosophy.

Briefly, he calls this approach to art ‘inaesthetics’, which he defines as “a relation of philosophy to art that, maintaining that art is itself a producer of truths, makes no claim to turn art into an object for philosophy. Against aesthetic speculation, inaesthetics describes the strictly intraphilosophical effects produced by the independent existence of some works of art.”²³ Of this definition we will suffice ourselves for the moment by noting that, as a philosopher, one of Badiou’s foremost

concerns is to examine art—or rather *particular* arts; *some* arts—as constitutive of certain universal truths, and, as such, as having something essential to offer philosophy.

Now, any reader with so much as a passing interest in Badiou's thought will know that art constitutes one of the four generic conditions of his philosophy (alongside politics, science, and love), and that philosophy, as he defines it, operates only inasmuch as it seizes these independent truths and places them in an immanent relation to one another. More than this, they will know that philosophy, according to Badiou, is itself fundamentally truthless, being rather the unique discipline tasked with thinking the 'compossibility', or the mutual and non-contradictory co-existence, of the various (artistic, political, amorous and scientific) truths that litter the world (and that are themselves ultimately forms of *thought*). Or again, Badiou tells us that there are truths which exist *out there*, prior to and wholly independent of philosophy, and that the latter's job is precisely that of grasping these diverse truths and 're-thinking' (or re-articulating) them in such a way that they can be brought together to cohere in a single system, which is finally what he calls a *philosophy*.²⁴ So the relationship between art and philosophy (or indeed between philosophy and any of its conditions) is for Badiou ultimately a 'thoughtful' one, where philosophy is charged with re-thinking the thought that art first thinks.

To come full circle, it is philosophy's structurally 'secondary' nature—its forever coming *after* truths—that leads Badiou to write off aesthetics in favour of 'inaesthetics' (which, as we have just seen, restricts itself to 'the intraphilosophical effects produced by the existence of some works of art'). In a word, it is truths that prescribe philosophy, and philosophy does not condescend to its conditions.

Returning then to Badiou's definition of inaesthetics, it is important to highlight how this term designates moreover the philosophical recapitulation of a relation between art and truth that is at once *singular* and *immanent*. This relationship is absolutely crucial for Badiou and as such is worth pausing to consider in some detail.

First, the relationship between art and truth is *singular* inasmuch as every artistic truth is peculiar to the art in question. So, for example, a truth of painting won't be found in poetry, just as music or photography are highly unlikely to produce any sculptural truths. This is in part a consequence of, on the one hand, Badiou's adamant belief that the arts constitute fundamentally closed systems (no painting

is ever going to turn into music, just as no poem is ever going to become dance...), and, on the other, the fact that every truth, while universal in address, is always the truth of a *particular situation*, and in art this situation is generally (though not necessarily) the situation of a *particular art*. Or as Badiou puts it, every artistic truth exists “in a rigorous immanence to the art in question”:²⁵ it is always a truth of *this* art, in *this* situation (and not another).

Parenthetically, it is at this point that some readers may be tempted to write Badiou off as an antediluvian ‘high modernist’. To be sure, every so often it can appear as though he is recycling the (supposedly discredited) line of thought generally associated with the modernist project, namely, the idea that it is the exclusive commitment of each art to its proper medium that will finally allow it to lay bare its ‘pure form’ (or, as Badiou would have it, its ‘generic truth’). Now, while Badiou may well at times be arguing something not entirely dissimilar to this, we would be far off the mark were we to reduce his thought to this kind of Greenbergian ‘autonomizing’ framework.²⁶ While it is clear that for Badiou each art is entirely differentiated from the other arts (possessing its own form, its own possibilities, particular content and modes of expression, and so on...), it is important to remember that an artistic truth is always the truth of a particular (artistic) situation, and a ‘situation’, so far as Badiou conceives it, is an incredibly plastic concept, insofar as it basically means *any grouping whatsoever*. So, for example, while Badiou praises someone like Kasimir Malevich—and in particular his 1918 suprematist masterpiece *White on White*—for giving us “the generic truth of painting’s singular situation”,²⁷ he can equally celebrate someone like Duchamp, whose readymades arguably explode the very idea of medium-specificity and expose something vital in the artistic situation at large.

There is however another important thread to the inaesthetic knot tying together art, truth and philosophy, namely, that of *immanence*. For Badiou holds that the relationship between these three terms—art, truth and philosophy—is not only singular but also immanent, insofar as every artistic work must be wholly present to the truth it fabricates. This is a slightly more delicate point, and results from Badiou’s materialist conception of truths, the general idea being that an artistic truth (or any truth for that matter)—despite its infinite nature—isn’t simply the truth *of* a situation, but is moreover *itself situated*. That is to say, it takes place in a world.

To summarize brutally: Badiou holds that an artistic truth is always embodied in an identifiable ‘artistic configuration’, whose origins lie in a vanished event—which suddenly (and inexplicably) gives form to what was previously formless—and whose entire body is composed of the manifold artworks that belong to this configuration. Meaning that each individual artwork serves as the very fabric from which its truth is gradually woven. This ‘weaving’ can, in principle, of course go on forever (one can always create another work *x* exploring the consequences of artistic event *y*...). Hence the infinity of a truth is in no way confined to a single finite work, but rather comprises an essentially infinite—or indeed, ‘eternal’—sequence of works.

As such, the entire ‘being’ of an artistic truth is located within its works, works which remain fundamentally outside of artistic ‘knowledge’ (or outside of ‘the state of art’), and as such can proceed solely by chance (this radical subtraction from knowledge being precisely why they constitute a mode of *thought*). To this end, each individual work figures something like an investigation or an ‘enquiry’ into the truth that it actualizes, piece by painstaking piece.

So to sum up, Badiou defines an artistic truth as a material configuration that, issuing from an event, and unfolding by chance alone, comprises an (in principle) infinite complex of works. Or again, to think art as both singular and immanent to truth—that is, to think *inaesthetically*—is for Badiou one and the same as to (re) think an artistic configuration.

The disappearing act

So far our thinking about the readymade *qua* event has focused primarily on two key features, being its site—which is less the exhibition itself than the unrepresented ‘everyday’ matter underlying the artwork (or its ‘base’ material)—and its illegality in the eyes of the state. What we need to do now is turn our attention to the remaining ‘evental’ points of *Fountain*’s non-exhibition, specifically: its appearing only to disappear; its figuring (at least initially) as an absolutely abstract work; and its ultimate transformation of the situation whence it emerged. In doing so we will be able to say something crucial about the event itself.

Regarding the first of these points (*Fountain*’s appearing-disappearing), we should first of all reiterate the fact that Duchamp’s urinal, which is to say the *work itself*, was almost immediately lost. Discarded as garbage, or perhaps burnt or stolen:

no one really knows. What *is* known is that it was absent from the *Society of Independent Artists*' exhibition as well as its catalogue, and was never seen again (all the various 'Fountains' housed in galleries and museums today are of course replicas). In point of fact, *Fountain* would almost certainly have been entirely forgotten were it not for the publication in *The Blind Man*—Duchamp's own review, no less—of a brief article in defence of the work entitled 'The Richard Mutt Case', which included Stieglitz's photo of the urinal, captioned 'The exhibit refused by the Independents'.²⁸

In other words, after having effectively engineered *Fountain*'s refusal—for Duchamp not only entered the offending urinal into the exhibition knowing full well it would be rejected, but also sat on the jury and remained silent during its deliberations, never once revealing his identity as the nefarious 'R. Mutt'—Duchamp then went on to use his own review to denounce this very same refusal. In this way, Duchamp paradoxically *did* succeed in exhibiting his urinal, in a manner of speaking, through the very act of denouncing the fact that it was not exhibited in the first place. That is to say, Duchamp's presumed authorship of 'The Richard Mutt Case' (the article itself was unsigned) essentially ensured that the non-appearance—or the *inexistence*—of *Fountain* was in fact retroactively rendered as an intense appearance through the subsequent *exhibition of its very non-exhibition*. Or again, with the publication of *The Blind Man* piece, the readymade suddenly became intensely apparent through its very inappearance.

Thus, as with Badiou's event, the coincidence of *Fountain*'s appearing-disappearing did in fact manage to leave a definite trace, in the form of a (published) affirmation not only of its claim to artistry, but moreover of non-art's integral relation to art itself. Far from vanishing without a trace, the readymade-event contrarily performed the ultimate disappearing act, *by turning its very disappearance into an 'act'*.

Appearing-disappearing to one side, *Fountain* is not without consequence for the crucial inaesthetic concept of *singularity*. Indeed, when we think of Duchamp's readymades, perhaps the most immediate problem we run up against is that of artistic *indiscernibility*, or the paradoxical fact that such objects cannot be said to belong exclusively to either the rarefied world of 'art'—and even if they did, we cannot help but wonder: which art?²⁹—or the everyday world of common, banal objects. For in "eliciting notions of aesthetic value while asserting its utter aesthetic valuelessness",³⁰ the readymade in fact pulls in two different directions:

simultaneously art and non-art, it belongs, in an ontological sense—at the level of its very *being*—to two fundamentally opposed registers. Structurally speaking, the readymade is thus, as Formis observes, an *intervallic* object:³¹ it presents itself as the ‘interval’ between the event and the everyday, between art and non-art, between avant-garde novelty and the familiarity of the *ancien régime*.

Now Duchamp himself famously theorized this intervallic structure of the readymade in terms of what he called an “infrathin separative difference”,³² that is, an indiscernible or ‘minimal difference’, not unlike the *in*-difference that Badiou isolates in Malevich’s (otherwise conspicuously *non*-Duchampian) painting *White on White* (between ground and form; between white and white...).³³ An object is ‘infrathin’, Duchamp claims, when it exhibits an “indifferent difference”,³⁴ or when two separate parts of its nature cannot be differentiated; when, in effect, we encounter the null “difference of the Same”.³⁵

Just as the infrathin establishes a sort of ‘differential identity’, blurring the line that separates two otherwise distinct things, likewise the readymade organizes an ‘indifferent difference’ between the work of art and the everyday object, rendering this distinction effectively indiscernible. Certainly, *Fountain* does not cease to be an industrially fabricated urinal simply because Duchamp chose it, signed it (as ‘R. Mutt’), and (almost) exhibited it. And yet, at the same time, its being chosen, signed and (non)exhibited nonetheless distinguishes it from every other industrially fabricated object, and indeed from all the banal everyday objects littering the world. *Fountain* thus exhibits a peculiar double-structure: it “presents its unity as a work of art *plus* the multiplicity of all the urinals that are similar to it”.³⁶ Being at the time the sole object to partake of such paradoxical double-belonging, the readymade could then be said to belong to its own unique category: that of the ‘readymade’. Meaning that the readymade, like the event itself, *auto-belongs*; it belongs exclusively *to itself*. Whence the simultaneous undecidability and autonomy of the readymade-event: beyond its aesthetic—or rather, *inaesthetic*—unity, it also displays its industrial multiplicity.³⁷ Or again, it presents itself, at one and the same time, as a single, discrete work of art, *and* as the universe of everyday objects.

As such, ever since the readymade-event, the world of art and the everyday world have become, at least to an extent, indiscernible, inasmuch as today any object whatsoever can be understood as having artistic *potential*, or the potential to *become* art, just as any rarefied work of art has the potential to enter into an intense

relation with the everyday. What is key here is the fact that, in affirming that the very material of art is first and foremost non-artistic, the readymade-event equally points to the fact that it is art's non-artistic material that *becomes* art. Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that Badiou can hold, at one and the same time, that “art is pure Idea”,³⁸ and that “the real of art comprises an ideal impurity”.³⁹ For, as the readymade-event so perfectly demonstrates, impurity is in fact a necessary condition—even a fundamental *law*—of art, for the simple reason that art, *real* art, always involves the formalization of what was previously formless, the radical becoming-art of what was heretofore considered non-art (or what, according to the artistic world in question, *did not previously exist*).

It is moreover precisely for this reason that all true artworks—and the readymade, as we have shown, is certainly not immune on this count—initially appear in the situation as absolutely *abstract* works, inasmuch as such art is, from the first, “abstracted from all particularity” and at the same time “formalizes this act of abstraction.”⁴⁰ After all, true art, in its essential (evental) *novelty*, necessarily appears as something wholly abstract to the world in which it appears (such ‘abstraction’ deriving, as we have seen, from the fact that it falls outside the realm of available knowledges). As such, Badiou’s call for a ‘purification’ of the arts, all too often misinterpreted as a naïve plea for a return to modernist sensibilities, should conversely be understood as being, on the one hand, a *destructive* gesture (one that eliminates ‘apparent’ impurities), and on the other, a fundamentally *creative* movement (one that formalises or *brings into form* what was previously formless, or ‘pure-ifies’ what was impure).

In fact, the case of *Fountain* perfectly illustrates the dual nature of the ‘subtractive procedure’ itself as simultaneously an act of *drawing under* and of *drawing forth*. While Malevich’s work, for example, embodies the subtractive process primarily in terms of ‘dis-appearance’ (of form, of colour, of space...)⁴¹—and thus as a movement toward ‘purity’ (understood here as *medium specificity*)—Duchamp’s readymades contrarily illustrate its *constructive* side, as something that *raises from beneath* (hence ‘sub-traction’, i.e. ‘pulling from under’): far from isolating the ‘thing itself’ by purging it of its inherent complications and impurities, *Fountain* contrarily establishes the impure as the basis from which all purity is constructed, exposing the infrathin minimal difference between art and its subjacent non-artistic material.

So once the readymade-event has taken place—after it has been affirmed as indeed belonging to the world of art—a certain equivalence between art and non-art is established, whereby it becomes equally possible to consider a representational object (like a work of art) *as* a presentational one (i.e. an ordinary, banal object), and *vice versa*.⁴² In other words, the readymade-event doesn't simply open up a 'positive' passage from non-art to art; it also establishes a corollary passage from art to non-art. And it is of course at this precise juncture that we have located the readymade's decisive operation of indiscernibility.

That being said, obviously the readymade doesn't belong to both the art world and the everyday world in the same manner. Simply, while the readymade-event demonstrates how all art emerges from non-art, this is not to say that all non-art will become art. Or again, while the everyday world is the indisputable *source* of the readymade (the urinal being, after all, not in the first instance an intentionally artistic work, but rather the product of technical industry), it is the world of art that figures its ultimate *determination* (as the readymade leads to a profound transformation of both artistic procedure and understanding).

It is, moreover, precisely this intentionality that defines both the eventual nature of the readymade, and, reciprocally, the *readymade nature of the event itself*. For like the readymade, the event is itself doubly subtracted from the situation, in the sense that it is at once *drawn under* by the logic of the world in question (contravening its laws and thus appearing only to disappear) and at the same time *drawn forth* from its detritus, being entirely composed of the very material deemed to be most insignificant by the current 'world order' (so much so that it fails to appear in this world, or that, ontologically speaking, it altogether lacks state representation).

Thus the event, whilst figuring on the one hand as a sudden and absolute rupture, equally represents a kind of paradoxical continuity, whereby the order of things is in reality only minimally (or 'infinitesimally') subverted such that two elements which were, ontologically speaking, always *there*, merely come to exchange positions.

Hence the simple and immediately apparent truth declared by the readymade (a truth that extends well beyond the confines of art, reverberating equally through all the generic fields): just as all art has its roots in non-art, so too the event has its foundation—indeed, its *entire being*—in the everyday. Or again, far from being

a 'miracle', the event is in truth nothing other than the spontaneous revelation of *what was there all along*. Every event, no matter how radical, exposes us not only to the shock but also *the schlock of the new*.

Western Sydney University

NOTES

1. Lauren Sedofsky for example managed to coax Badiou to himself acknowledge the obviousness of this connection in an interview conducted for *Artforum* (Alain Badiou & Lauren Sedofsky, “Matters of Appearance: An Interview with Alain Badiou” *Artforum* 45:3 (2006, 252)), while Barbara Formis turned to Duchamp to analyse the event in relation to art and the artistic field more generally in her excellent essay (to which the present article owes no small debt) “Event and Ready-Made: Delayed Sabotage” *Communication & Cognition* 27:3 (2004, 247–261).
2. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), 181.
3. “The state”, Badiou observes, “is an entity that has only one idea: to persevere in its being”, Alain Badiou & Marcel Gauchet, *What Is To Be Done?: A Dialogue on Communism, Capitalism, and the Future of Democracy*. Trans. Susan Spitzer. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016, 40. Needless to say, this ontological ‘state’ is irreducible to its political namesake: while the two can certainly operate in concert, they are in no way equivalent terms (Badiou is careful to point out that the state is only named as such “due to a metaphorical affinity with politics”, Badiou, *Being and Event*, 95). Technically, Badiou’s ‘state’ simply designates the ontological ‘superstructure’ of the situation, being the double structuring or ‘count of the count’ by which the structure of a situation is itself ‘counted as one’, thereby ensuring that there is both (situated) presentation and (statist) *re*-presentation. That said, while the state itself (*qua* structural re-count) necessarily remains ‘unintentional’, the same need not apply for the various organisations—such as the parliamentary state, or (as with our case) certain artistic institutions—that might serve as its *placeholder*.
4. Badiou, *Being and Event*, 198.
5. Badiou, *Being and Event*, 189.
6. Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), 369.
7. In *Logics of Worlds* Badiou holds that the various multiples constituting a situation are equally caught up in a complex relational network according to which they ‘appear’ more or less intensely with regard to one another. These differentially appearing multiplicities constitute the *objects* of a given world, while the relative intensity of each object’s appearing in a world falls under the jurisdiction of the *transcendental* immanent to that world, whose function it is to evaluate and order each object’s relation to all the other objects of the world. For complex reasons pertaining to Badiou’s thesis on the equivalence of ‘logic’ and ‘appearing’, a world’s transcendental regime requires that there be both an absolutely apparent object (i.e. an object that enjoys a maximal degree of identity between itself and every other object that appears in the world) and its opposite, namely, an object which has a ‘zero-degree’ of appearance, one which fails to ‘identify’ (or enter into a relationship) with any other worldly object. Being identical to nothing in the world, such an object is said to *inappear* in the world in question.
8. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 363.
9. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 452.
10. This is perhaps the most conspicuous ‘switch’ between *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*, as in the former work it was in fact the *event*—as opposed to (and entirely distinct from) its *site*—which constituted the paradoxical reflexive multiple (being composed of, on the one hand, all the unrepresented elements of the site, and on the other, itself). From *Logics of Worlds* on however Badiou is able to fundamentally identify the event with the site. Or more precisely, Badiou demonstrates that a site *can be* an event. Obviously this identification involves a significant revision of his earlier claim that “an event is not (does not coincide with) an evental site”, Badiou, *Being and*

Event, 182.

11. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 369.

12. Alain Badiou, *Mathematics of the Transcendental*, ed. and trans. A.J. Bartlett & Alex Ling (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 165.

13. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Trans. Peter Hallward. London: Verso, 2001, 73.

14. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 384.

15. See note 7 above.

16. The crucial role of artistic exhibition was moreover not lost on Duchamp, who himself conferred an equal weight on the act of ‘spectatorship’, famously holding that “the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act” Marcel Duchamp, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet & Elmer Peterson (New York: De Capo Press, 1989), 140.

17. Formis, “Event and Ready-Made”, 248.

18. Thierry De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 128.

19. Louise Norton, “Buddah of the Bathroom” *The Blind Man* 2 (1917, 5).

20. Duchamp, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 142.

21. Calvin Tomkins, *Marcel Duchamp: The Afternoon Interviews* (Brooklyn: Badlands Unlimited, 2013), 17 (my emphasis). At the risk of pre-empting our own argument, it is worth clarifying that the readymade in fact disqualifies neither art nor the possibility of identifying art, but rather a certain conception of art aligned with what Badiou has elsewhere called the “aesthetics of distinction”, being an aesthetics that holds there are “intelligible, rational boundaries between art and non-art, and potentially transmissible criteria for these distinctions”, Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, trans. Susan Spitzer (London: Verso, 2010), 3. As we will see, *Fountain* does not so much negate art *per se* as it decomposes its supposed boundaries by announcing its indiscernibility, or its necessary imbrication with *what-it-is-not*, namely, non-art. This (in)distinction will prove crucial to our overall argument regarding the nature of the event itself.

22. As Duchamp explains with regard to painting, “let’s say that you use a tube of paint; you didn’t make it. You bought it and used it as a readymade. Even if you mixed two vermilion together, it’s still a mixing of two readymades. So man can never expect to start from scratch; he must start from ready-made things like even his own mother and father”, Duchamp in De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 162.

23. Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), xiv.

24. In his book on Gilles Deleuze, Badiou defines philosophy’s single and singular objective simply as “the thinking of thought”, Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 21.

25. Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 13.

26. The influential American art critic Clement Greenberg famously held that, in modernism, “the unique and proper area of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium ... Thereby each art would be rendered ‘pure’, and in its ‘purity’ find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence”, Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 775.

27. Alain Badiou & Lauren Sedofsky, “Being by Numbers” *Artforum* 33:2 (1994), 124.

28. Unattributed, “The Richard Mutt Case” *The Blind Man* 2 (1917, 3–4).
29. While one may suppose *Fountain* to constitute a kind of ‘sculpture’—its presentation in Stieglitz’s famous photograph (where it sits atop a plinth) certainly suggesting as much—this is in no way incontestable. Alex Potts, for example, conceives of the readymades’ power as lying predominantly in their photographic reproductions (Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, 114–117), while Thierry de Duve convincingly argues that the readymade is rather an extension of the field of painting, Thierry De Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, trans. Dana Polen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
30. Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, 114.
31. Formis, “Event and Ready-Made”, 254.
32. Marcel Duchamp, *Notes*, ed. Paul Matisse (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), n.p.
33. In *The Century* (Trans. Alberto Toscano, [Cambridge: Polity, 2007]), Badiou holds up Malevich’s 1918 work depicting an asymmetrical white square suspended above a white field—its contours barely discernible from its surroundings, its form hovering at the very threshold of visibility—as the epitome of ‘purification’ within the field of painting, in addition to marking the origin of the subtractive orientation of thought that would become one of the defining features of the twentieth century and equally prescribe Badiou’s own philosophical procedure. Indeed, while Badiou does not say as much himself, what *White on White* so perfectly presents, in the realm of art, and through entirely subtractive means, is nothing other than the gap between the bare minimum effect of structure (the fragile white square) and that which is radically unstructured (the white void). Or in ontological terms: the gap between the operation of the count and the abyss of pure multiplicity; between structural consistency and the formlessness of the void; between the situation and its in-consistent underside. Crucially, this gap also figures a point of radical *indiscernibility*, a point where multiple-being and its counting-as-one (the white square being, after all, perhaps *the* paradigmatic instance of a ‘unit’) are brought so close as to become indistinguishable from each other. So by placing form at the edge of the void, “in a network of cuts and disappearances” (Badiou, *The Century*, 132), Malevich’s painting effectively captures the abstract or ‘infrathin’ difference between being itself and what is presented of being. It is to this effect that we can say of Malevich’s *White on White* that it truly is an ‘ontological painting. For a detailed reading of this relation, see Alex Ling, *Badiou Reframed* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).
34. De Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism*, 160.
35. Badiou, *The Century*, 53.
36. Formis, “Event and Ready-Made”, 254.
37. Formis, “Event and Ready-Made”, 255.
38. Alain Badiou, “Some Remarks Concerning Marcel Duchamp” *The Symptom* 9 (2008) http://www.lacan.com/symptom9_articles/badiou29.html.
39. Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, ed. and trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), 146.
40. Badiou, *Polemics*, 146.
41. As noted above, *White on White* famously experiments with the furthest reaches of abstraction. Everything in the painting has been systematically evacuated; form is sacrificed and colour has been almost totally drained, leaving only a pale geometrical allusion, “the zero of form” (Kasimir Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting” *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 173, little more than the *idea* of a square.
42. This exchange is perhaps most explicit in Duchamp’s formula for the ‘reciprocal readymade’,

in which he famously proposed to “use a Rembrandt as an ironing board”, Duchamp, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 142.