

Ready-Mades: Ontology and Aesthetics

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I explore the interrelations between the ontological and aesthetic issues raised by ready-mades such as Duchamp's Fountain. I outline a hylomorphic metaphysics which has two central features. First, hylomorphically complex objects have matter to which they are not identical. Secondly, when such objects are artefacts (including artworks), it is essential to them that they are the products of creative work on their matter. Against this background, I suggest that ready-mades are of aesthetic interest because they pose a dilemma. Is there really an object, a sculpture, that is distinct from its matter, a urinal, which object is created merely by the artist's choice of the urinal? Or are we dealing with a case in which an artist passes off something, a urinal, as if it were a sculpture, even though it is not one?

Everyone knows of the scandal of the ready-made: 'an ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist'.¹ (Hereafter, I will refer to the quoted phrase as 'the definition of the ready-made'. Its authorship will be discussed below.) The idea has resonated for two reasons. First, the ready-made raises aesthetic issues. Can there be any value other than pragmatic in a commonplace object, one associated with mundane activities or even, like Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, bodily functions? Is there any value to viewing such an object? Are such things properly placed in museums and galleries? Are artists mocking their audiences? Secondly, the ready-made raises metaphysical issues. What is the relation between the ordinary object itself and the (alleged) work of art? Does the artist create anything new by merely choosing (or displaying) an already-made object? Is creation of one thing out of another possible when the object 'out of which' is not actually modified? If work is required for the creation of one thing out of another, are there constraints on how much, and what kind of, work? In this article, I will suggest a way in which the metaphysical and aesthetic issues raised by ready-mades are connected, if taken against the background of a particular metaphysical theory, hylomorphism.

1. How Apt Is the Definition of the Ready-Made?

Before we get to those connections, however, a little more must be said about the very idea of the ready-made. The definition of the ready-made, quoted above, appears over the signature 'M.D.', in the *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* (1938) by André Breton and Paul Eluard. But the adequacy of this definition as a guide to understanding the reality of Duchamp's ready-mades from the teens of the twentieth century is put into question by at

1 The entry for 'Ready Made' in André Breton and Paul Eluard (eds), *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* (Paris: Galerie Beaux-Arts, 1938), 23. Translated by Hector Obalk in his 'The Unfindable Readymade', *tout-fait* 1 (2000), ch. 1 <http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_2/Articles/obalk.html> accessed 4 September 2013.

least three considerations. First, evidence suggests the definition was actually composed, not by Duchamp, as its signature suggests, but by Breton.² Secondly, it seems that, around the time the ready-mades were of concern to Duchamp, he hardly exhibited them at all, and was not at all concerned about preserving them. Of the ten unassisted ready-mades listed by Obalk (nine of which no longer exist), Duchamp only actually exhibited two, and attempted to exhibit a third, *Fountain*. The two exhibited (together) were not named, labelled, or made prominent at all (and indeed, we do not know for sure which they were). Obalk's conclusion is worth quoting at length:

A readymade has to carry some contextual details which say: 'this is a readymade'. If not, it is only a shovel decorating the studio of an eccentric Frenchman. It is not enough that MD bought a bottle rack without using it to dry up bottles. It is not enough that MD believes and makes believe that this bottle rack is a work of art (because any collector considers any of the weird things he gets and installs in his house for plastic reasons, as pure and marvellous artworks — such as keyholders, coffee grinders or advertising ceramic plates). MD also has to believe and make believe that he (and not the designer) became the author of these chosen objects. And the only way to do so is to exhibit clearly the chosen object in an art show amid other works of art and with the same status. Such an exhibition didn't take place. So if there is no work on the object (because it is only chosen), and if there is no exhibition of the chosen object, there is no readymade, and consequently there is no new artwork.³

Rather than being an artist who is able to transform, as if by magic, an ordinary object into a work of art, Duchamp was, according to Obalk, 'a thinker who expresses himself artistically'.⁴

Thirdly, many things considered as ready-mades are in fact not single ordinary objects elevated to the status of a work of art. They are constructions that use ordinary objects along with other things (sometimes other ordinary objects). The collages of Kurt Schwitters are cases in which ordinary objects are incorporated into larger compositions, as are the so-called 'assisted ready-mades' of Duchamp, such as *Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy?* These cases challenge our ontological conceptions about art far less than a work conforming to the definition of the ready-made. After all, quantities of paint are

2 The evidence is that an almost identical definition of the ready-made appeared three years earlier in an article by Breton: 'manufactured objects elevated to the dignity of works of art by the choice of the artist' (André Breton, 'Phare de la Mariée', *Minotaure* 2 (1935), 46–49, at 46; quoted in Obalk, 'The Unfindable Readymade', ch. 5). The translation is mine, and I have endeavoured to match, where possible, Obalk's translation of the entry in the *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme*, thus making clear how the two definitions differ. Obalk also suggests that speaking of 'the dignity of a work of art' is not much like Duchamp. Cf. William Camfield's opinion: 'Breton's emphasis on metamorphosis and the magic power of the artist was potent. It is still part of our experience of the readymades, although historical perspective enables us to see that such an emphasis was indeed a contribution of Breton and the epoch of Surrealism, distinguished from ... the aesthetic and anthropomorphic associations [of *Fountain*] stressed by Duchamp's colleagues in 1917', William Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp: 'Fountain'* (Houston, TX: Menil Collection, 1989), 66.

3 Obalk, 'The Unfindable Readymade', ch. 7.

4 *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

themselves ordinary objects and it is combinations of these ordinary objects that provide the paradigms of works of art.⁵ A Schwitters collage or Tracey Emin's *My Bed* are not *single* ordinary objects elevated to an august status; and the standard artistic values of technique, skill, composition, and so on might all be thought to have a role to play in their creation. (I will discuss this further in Section 7.) However, even some of the so-called 'unassisted' ready-mades of Duchamp may conform to this type, albeit in a minimal way. *Fountain*, for example, includes not just the urinal, but the signature 'R. Mutt 1917' added by Duchamp. One might, therefore, think that the ontological status of the work is no different, in kind, from that of Emin's *My Bed*, which is no different from that of Schwitters' *Merzbild*, which is no different from that of a still life by Cézanne.

2. Response to Doubts

By way of a general response to these doubts about the adequacy of the definition, we may say this. Whether or not the definition of the ready-made itself is by Duchamp is, from one point of view, not that important. The point of the investigation undertaken here is not about exactly what Duchamp was doing, but rather about a conception of what artists in general can (and have been taken to) do. If the definition is by Breton rather than Duchamp, it nonetheless represents a way in which an important figure in Duchamp's cultural environment understood what Duchamp was doing. So also do other statements made by people around Duchamp. For example, the author of an unsigned editorial called 'The Richard Mutt Case', published in the second issue of *The Blind Man* (May 1917),⁶ writes, concerning *Fountain*:

Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object.⁷

William Camfield says that this editorial was 'written by Beatrice Wood [a friend of Duchamp's and one of the co-editors of *The Blind Man*] . . . and there can be no doubt that it accurately represented Duchamp's thoughts and was approved by him, if not in part written by him'.⁸

5 Duchamp himself had the same thought: 'Let's say you use a tube of paint; you didn't make it. You bought it and used it as a ready-made. Even if you mix two vermilion together, it's still a mixing of two ready-mades. So man can never expect to start from scratch; he must start from ready-made things like even his own mother and father.' Marcel Duchamp, interviewed by Katherine Kuh in her *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Modern Artists* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 90.

6 This publication was produced by Duchamp, along with others. The second issue is the one in which Alfred Stieglitz's famous photograph of *Fountain* was first published. The title of the editorial reflects the signature on *Fountain*; at this point, almost no one knew that Mutt was Duchamp himself.

7 Quoted in William Camfield, 'Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*: Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917', in Rudolf Kuenzli and Francis Naumann (eds), *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 76; originally published in *Dada/Surrealism* 16 (1987), 64–94.

8 *Ibid.*

In the same vein, but more generally, in the very study from which we have already quoted, Hector Obalk writes:

It is as if the readymade was the hero of a fable, of a story, of a school hypothesis, of a speculation according to which ‘an ordinary object [could] become an artwork because of the mere choice of an artist’.⁹

But the fable has acquired a momentum of its own, and in any case, as the definition (and other evidence presented by Obalk) shows, always stood a mere hair’s breadth away from the reality it mythologized. The difference between the fable and reality here is—to use a term of Duchamp’s—‘infrathin’. As a ‘school hypothesis’, the understanding of the ready-made as an ordinary object elevated to the status of an artwork by the mere choice of an artist has entered the critical and philosophical canon. In an influential article on Duchamp from 1945, Harriet and Sidney Janis write:

Ready-mades are what the name implies, complete objects which are at hand, and which by reason of the artist’s selectivity are considered by him as belonging in the realm of his own creative activity. The assumption is that the object, conveying properties which coincide with the artist’s angle of approach, is endowed as a work of art by virtue of the insight and authority of the artist’s selection. Selection is here no longer just a step in the process. It becomes a completed technique.¹⁰

Today, it is held to be ‘a commonplace’ that

Emin’s bed or beach hut or Damien Hirst’s medicine bottles or Duchamp’s snow shovel become in some sense ‘transformed’ by being put on show and invite a different kind of attention when removed from their original contexts.¹¹

The commonplace means that references to works like *Fountain*, understood in precisely this way, regularly crop up in philosophical discussions to support or refute various theories in aesthetics and metaphysics. (We shall encounter one such cropping up in an article by Dean Zimmerman, in Section 4.)

The definition’s role as a ‘school hypothesis’ is even more strongly attested to by the fact that some views about the ontology of quite different types of artworks are reasonably described by it. Jerrold Levinson has proposed that musical works in the classical tradition are what he calls indicated sound structures.¹² An indicated sound structure (to simplify a little) is created by an artist when she indicates a sound structure, a pre-existing (though perhaps not quite ordinary) object.¹³ Insofar as indicating can itself be seen as a modality

9 Obalk, ‘The Unfindable Readymade’, ch. 4.

10 Harriet Janis and Sidney Janis, ‘Marcel Duchamp: Anti-artist’, reprinted in Robert Motherwell (ed.), *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (New York: George Wittenborn, 1951), 310, originally published in *Horizon* 12 (1945), 257–268.

11 Peter Lamarque, ‘On Perceiving Conceptual Art’, in Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens (eds), *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 11.

12 Jerrold Levinson, ‘What a Musical Work Is’, *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980), 5–28, and Simon Evnine, ‘Constitution and Qua Objects in the Ontology of Music’, *BJA* 49 (2009), 203–217.

13 The limitation of the theory to works in the classical tradition is supposed, I believe, to allow for different ontologies to describe the realities of such things as jazz improvisations. The improvising artist is not (or at least may not be) creating an indicated sound structure by indicating a sound structure in spontaneous performance.

of choosing or selecting, it seems, if Levinson is right, that we have a case in which an artwork comes into being by the mere choice by an artist of a pre-existing object.¹⁴

Thus, if the definition of the ready-made does not fit perfectly all of the examples of even the unassisted ready-mades of Duchamp, it was nonetheless taken by some of his confederates (and possibly himself) as fitting them; it has acquired a kind of authority in how we understand and evaluate many artworks; and it persists as the basis of a robust theory in the philosophical literature and as the foundation for a regularly invoked trope in metaphysics and aesthetics.

3. Hylomorphism

Here is a very brief overview of the variety of hylomorphism that will feature in the following. Central to the view is the idea of an object's having matter, where the relation of x 's having y as matter is irreflexive and asymmetric. Since the relation is irreflexive, an object that has matter is always distinct from its matter. The same idea is often expressed in the language of constitution, in those cases where the constitution relation is taken as irreflexive and asymmetric.¹⁵ I describe objects that have matter as hylomorphically complex. The main problem facing such a view is to say what it is in virtue of which, in addition to the matter, there exists a further hylomorphically complex object. Supposing a house to be a hylomorphically complex object, in virtue of what is there an object, a house, in addition to the bricks, mortar, and windows that are its matter?¹⁶ In the case of artefacts (including artworks), my approach to this question is historical, in the following sense.¹⁷ Hylomorphically complex objects are essentially connected to the history of the work on their matter by which they are brought into existence. It is because the bricks have been worked on by an agent, with certain intentions, that a house comes into existence with the bricks as its matter. This is not just a causal claim about how houses happen to get made. It is a claim about what a house is, about the essence of houses. Houses, and other artefacts, are, in their very natures, the results of the imposition of mind on matter.¹⁸ Hence, it is

14 For more on the precise nature of indication, see Jerrold Levinson, 'Indication, Abstraction, and Individuation', in Christy Mag Uidhir (ed.), *Art and Abstract Objects* (Oxford: OUP, 2013).

15 So hylomorphists, in my sense, include Lynne Baker, *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life: An Essay in Practical Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Kit Fine, 'Acts, Events and Things', in *Language and Ontology: Proceedings of the 6th International Wittgenstein Symposium* (Vienna: Holder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1982), 97–105; Kathrin Koslicki, *The Structure of Objects* (Oxford: OUP, 2008); Peter Lamarque, *Work and Object: Explorations in the Metaphysics of Art* (Oxford: OUP, 2010); Judith Jarvis Thomson, 'The Statue and the Clay', *Noûs* 32 (1998), 149–173, among many others.

16 There is an obvious analogy here with Peter van Inwagen's Special Composition Question though (1) my question is expressed in terms of matter rather than parts; and (2) I am not assuming that the answer to this question must be the same for all cases. See Peter van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

17 Whether and how such an approach can be extended beyond the realm of artefacts, to account for the existence of biological or other natural objects is a large question with which I attempt to deal in a book manuscript in progress (*Making Objects and Events: A Neo-Aristotelian Metaphysics*).

18 Philosophers who support something like this position, when it comes to works of art, include Jerrold Levinson, 'Artworks as Artifacts', in Eric Margolis and Stephen Laurence (eds), *Creations of the Mind: Theories of Artifacts and Their*

in virtue of the creative work on the matter that there exists a hylomorphically complex object distinct from that matter.¹⁹

4. Three Questions about Ready-Mades

Given this general context, we can formulate three questions that will be important in thinking about ready-mades:

(a) A substantial kind is a kind such that the things falling under it do so essentially, and such that, for those individuals, the kind provides a privileged answer to the question ‘what is it?’ (I shall not explore the nature of this privilege here.) Phasal kinds, by contrast, are such that the things falling under them do so only if and when they pass through a certain phase; hence these kinds do not provide the same kind of privileged answer to the question ‘what is it?’, asked of something falling under them.²⁰ Examples of substantial kinds include *lion* and *H₂O*. Examples of phasal kinds include *pet* and *ice*. So, a pet lion is a lion essentially; that very thing, the lion, could not exist but fail to be a lion. But a given pet can fail to be a pet. As a result, to say of something that it is a lion is to give a better account of what it is than to say of it that it is a pet. If a lion comes to be, a new entity augments the world. But when an already existing wild lion comes to be a pet, the world is not augmented. The pet is not a further object, over and above the lion that becomes a pet. One ontological question that is pertinent to ready-mades, therefore, is whether the kinds they fall under and in virtue of which they are exhibited in museums and written about by art critics, kinds like *sculpture*, are substantial or phasal kinds.

The definition of the ready-made is ‘an ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist’. This locution is entirely indicative of the ways in which people speak about ready-mades (and often about artefacts in general). A casual look at it might suggest that it implicitly takes *ready-made* (and I assume, *mutatis mutandis*, *sculpture*) to be a phasal kind, under which ordinary objects come to fall when elevated in dignity by the choice of an artist. This may or may not have been the considered view of whoever wrote the definition, and of some or all of the many authors who use similar language. But in fact, the way of speaking in question does not settle the issue. To facilitate my explanation of why, I shall consider, not the definition itself, but the expression ‘the ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist’ where ‘the ordinary object’ is taken to refer to some contextually given ordinary object. Call this ‘the modified definition’. (I will also consider instances of the modified definition such as ‘the urinal elevated . . .’) The modified definition is capable of two quite different readings. The first, which I call the comma reading, takes it as though there were

Representation (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 74–82; Peter Lamarque, *Work and Object*; and Amie Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

19 Obviously a lot more needs to be said about this view; and nothing here is supposed to amount to a defence of it. The view is elaborated and defended in my *Making Objects and Events*.

20 Phasal kinds are one variety of accidental kinds, but not all accidental kinds need be phasal. For the purposes of this article, in which I discuss works of art made out of already existing materials, the possibility of non-phasal accidental kinds will be ignored (except briefly in one place).

a comma after 'object', so the expression as a whole contains a referring noun phrase and a modifying adjectival phrase. In that case, the whole expression refers to whatever the noun phrase in it refers to. After all, an object, modified in some way, is still just that object. So a urinal, elevated to the dignity of a work of art, is still a urinal.²¹ The other reading, which I call the hyphen reading, hears the modified definition as if all the words in it from 'ordinary' on were joined by hyphens. In this case, the whole expression 'the ordinary-object-elevated- ...' is a single noun phrase and may refer to some object distinct from that to which 'the ordinary object' refers.

In discussions of ready-mades, and indeed of artefacts in general, some people clearly have one reading of expressions like the modified definition and its instances in mind, and some the other. For example, Margaret Boden writes:

[*Fountain*] was certainly shocking, considered as a sculpture, since it was a mass-manufactured object bought from a warehouse, not something lovingly forged by Duchamp's individual skills.²²

It is clear from this that Boden takes *Fountain* to be a urinal considered as a sculpture, and that she gives 'a urinal considered as a sculpture' a comma reading. For it was the urinal that was mass-manufactured and bought from a warehouse. By contrast, Louise Norton, a friend of Duchamp's, writes, contra Boden's view:

To those who say that Mr. Mutt's exhibit may be Art, but is it the art of Mr. Mutt since a plumber made it? I reply simply that the *Fountain* was not made by a plumber but by the force of an imagination.²³

Since the urinal was 'made by a plumber', *Fountain* cannot, for Norton, be that urinal. Hence, if *Fountain* were 'a urinal considered as a sculpture', Norton would have to give that expression a hyphen reading. I suspect that most often, writers either do not recognize the ambiguity or opportunistically exploit it by sometimes treating instances of the modified definition in the comma way, thereby displaying their bona fides as parsimonious ontologists, and sometimes in the hyphen way, thereby acknowledging the creative role of the artist. Consider the expression 'bottle rack chosen by MD' in this passage from Obalk:

Now, is there a difference between a bottle rack and the very same bottle rack chosen by MD? No. There is no difference. Yes, there is an infrathin difference, which is invisible: it is his artistical intention.²⁴

This *sic et non*, I suggest, trades on the possibility of giving the relevant expression two different readings.

21 Cf. 'holy water is water and occupied Paris was Paris', Mark Johnston, 'Manifest Kinds', *Journal of Philosophy* 94 (1997), 564–583, at 567.

22 Margaret Boden, 'Creativity and Conceptual Art', in Goldie and Schellekens, *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, 221.

23 Louise Norton, 'Buddha of the Bathroom', originally published in issue 2 of *The Blind Man* in 1917, quoted in Camfield, 'Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*', 78.

24 Obalk, 'The Unfindable Readymade', ch. 5.

From an ontological point of view, attending to this ambiguity is of the utmost importance. The hylomorphism I have just described will clearly read such expressions in the hyphen way, taking the complex noun phrases to refer to hylomorphically complex objects, and the embedded noun phrases ('the ordinary object', 'the urinal') to refer to the matter of those hylomorphically complex objects.²⁵ If such expressions are then used to say what a sculpture, or a ready-made, is, that will be consistent with seeing *sculpture* (or *ready-made*) as a substantial kind. If, on the other hand, the expressions are given a comma reading, while saying what a sculpture or a ready-made is, that will suggest that the kinds in question are phasal.

(b) If artefacts are essentially the results of work performed on their matter, just how much, and what kind of, work is required for the creation of a new object by an agent? A worry that is often expressed about views like the hylomorphism I outlined above is that if we allow working on some matter to bring something new into existence, we will be forced, as we imagine cases in which less and less work is required, to say finally that one can bring something new into existence merely by thinking or talking or acting in a certain way with respect to whatever would become the new thing's matter. The ready-made is of interest here because it seems to lie at (or close to) the limit, where there is no (or almost no) work on the matter at all. By simply choosing an already existing urinal, the artist may be able to bring into existence a new object, distinct from the urinal, that has that urinal as its matter. We appear to have a case of creation by thought, talk, or choice alone.

Responding to the views of Lynne Baker (who is a hylomorphist in the sense of this article), Dean Zimmerman moots this kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, appealing to an example that is or is close to Duchamp's *Fountain*:

Baker thinks we sometimes bring things into existence by thinking about them—at least, this follows from her view if objects can become artifacts (tools and works of art and monuments, for instance) simply by our thinking of them as such. A piece of conveniently shaped driftwood becomes a coffee table by being brushed off and brought into the house, a urinal becomes a sculpture when hung on a wall in a museum and given a title ... But do we really believe that anything new comes into existence when we do such things?²⁶

25 Kit Fine's theory of qua objects (in 'Acts, Events, and Things') is a hylomorphic view on which this is true in a particularly strong way. If 'the *F*' refers to some object, for any distinct adjectival modifications *G* and *H*, it follows (more or less, with a few assumptions) on Fine's theory that 'the *F-G*' and 'the *F-H*' refer to *distinct*, hylomorphically complex objects (in his terminology, 'the *F qua G*' and 'the *F qua H*'). My own version of hylomorphism is not committed to this. For this reason, I prefer, in my own usage, to confine instances of the modified definition to the comma reading, and not to make claims of the form 'such and such artefact is the *FG*'.

26 Dean Zimmerman, 'The Constitution of Persons by Bodies: A Critique of Lynne Rudder Baker's Theory of Material Constitution', *Philosophical Topics* 30 (2002), 295–338, at 333–334. Zimmerman's language here is unnecessarily paradoxical, owing to a confusion of what is thought about and what is allegedly brought into existence. At first it seems as if he is considering the view that it is by thinking of a particular coffee table that I bring *it* into existence (or perhaps that by thinking of a generic coffee table I bring a particular one into existence). As the passage continues, however, it seems as if he is concerned with the view that it is by thinking of a piece of driftwood (in the right way) that I bring into existence a distinct coffee table. I shall take Zimmerman as unequivocally having this second possibility in his sights here, since the first bears no resemblance to Baker's view at all.

So a second question we can ask about ready-mades, in the context of hylomorphism, is whether they really do count as cases of creation of a new object by mere choice. And if so, is that an objection to such hylomorphism?

(c) It is unproblematic (relatively speaking, though see Section 5 for some general discussion of making artefacts out of things) that we make some artefacts out of a multiplicity of other artefacts. A house, one artefact, is made out of bricks, windows, beams, nails, and so on, all of which are themselves artefacts. If *Fountain* were a hylomorphically complex object the matter of which is a urinal, we would seem to have a case in which one artefact is made out of another, *single* artefact.²⁷ (That the urinal itself might be made out of a number of artefacts or non-artefacts is irrelevant to this point.) Some have thought that this is problematic. Judith Thomson describes what she calls the artefact thesis:

(AT) ‘No two artifacts can occupy the same place at the same time.’²⁸

She herself is sympathetic to the principle, though she holds off from fully endorsing it. One way one might challenge apparent counterexamples to it is by invoking the distinction between substantial and phasal kinds discussed under (a). To give one of Thomson’s examples, if a throne is made out of a chair, by adding a crown to it and performing whatever royal rituals are necessary, do we have two artefacts in the same place at the same time, a chair and a throne?²⁹ Thomson suggests, plausibly, that *throne* is itself a phasal kind. Hence there is no counterexample to AT. But another way of dealing with potential counterexamples also suggests itself. In some cases, at least, it is tempting to think that we are dealing with the phenomenon *not* of an *F*’s being made out of an existing entity, a *G*, but rather of a *G*’s being used as an *F*, or as if it were an *F*. For example, suppose when working out of doors, I need something to keep some papers from blowing away and I put my sandwich on them to effect this. It is very plausible to say that I do not make a new object, a paperweight, out of the sandwich (merely by placing the sandwich on the papers), nor even that I put the sandwich into a paperweight phase (by my placing of it). Rather I use the sandwich as a paperweight, or as if it were a paperweight. So, a third question to ask about ready-mades, stemming from our background hylomorphic metaphysics, is whether we are dealing with a case of using an *F* as a *G*—in the case of *Fountain*, of using a urinal as, or as if it were, a sculpture.

5. Answer to (a)

Let us now begin to answer these questions, starting with whether *sculpture* is a phasal kind. If it were, then it would be a lot easier to see what was going on with ready-mades.

27 Though see the discussion in Section 1 concerning the existence of the signature on the urinal.

28 Thomson, ‘The Statue and the Clay’, 166. Hybrid artefacts, such as the combined cellphone and camera, do not represent counterexamples to AT. Few would be tempted by the thought that there were, in such a case, two distinct objects occupying the same space. Rather, there is a single object of a new, hybrid type.

29 The addition of the crown slightly complicates matters since it could be argued that the chair does not occupy the whole of the region occupied by the throne. One can easily imagine, however, a method of making a chair into a throne that required only a ceremony, and no addition of a crown. By analogy, existing buildings are made into churches by being consecrated.

The artist would (attempt to) put something that already exists into a certain phase. Whether an artist could do this would be an interesting question, but it would be one without distinctively *ontological* significance. Whether or not it is reasonable to suppose that an artist can make something a sculpture by a mere choice would be no more ontologically telling than whether citizens in a democracy could make someone a judge by choosing her (in an election). So taking *sculpture* to be a phasal kind would deflate at least some of the problems raised by ready-mades. This might seem like a good thing. We would be able to bypass the issues raised in (b) and (c) above concerning whether an artist can bring something new into existence by mere choice, and whether we have two distinct artefacts, a urinal and a sculpture, occupying the same space at the same time. But, as I will suggest below, it is the possibility that an artist can bring something into being by a mere choice, and hence that we might have two distinct artefacts at the same location, that generates much of the aesthetic interest of ready-mades.

Is *sculpture*, then, a phasal or a substantial kind? We need to distinguish two very different background positions (or better, families of positions) that might lead one to deny that *sculpture* is a substantial kind. First, one may agree that many artefactual kinds are substantial but, for some reason, think that *sculpture* is not. Just as *chair* might be a substantial kind but *throne* not, so *urinal* might be one, and *sculpture* not. Secondly, one might be sceptical as to whether any artefactual kinds are substantial. Although these positions agree in holding that *sculpture* is not a substantial kind, they are quite different from each other in what drives them, and what the larger issues are that they raise.

The first, clearly, is less radical than the second and, as such, seems the best way for someone who is not greatly driven by ontological theorizing to try and deflate the ontological problems of ready-mades. The position, however, is subject to a serious objection. Suppose someone carves some ivory to make a piano key. Since the position under consideration allows that artefact kinds can be substantial, let us stipulate that this is such a case. (If that seems implausible, you may substitute another example.) Now consider a sculptor carving a block of marble lovingly and with care and skill, so that it comes to have the form of a human figure, and suppose that, in doing this, the sculptor intended to make a sculpture of a human figure. If *sculpture* is never a substantial kind, then we will have to say that while the carver of the ivory does bring into existence a new object, a piano key, which has the ivory as its matter, the sculptor does not actually create anything at all. All she does is to put some marble into a sculpture phase. It seems strange that the very point at which we generally invoke the notion of creativity, in the arts, is precisely where, at least for sculpture, we will have to say that no creation takes place, even though creation can take place in all sorts of contexts that resemble the artistic one.

We might try to get around this by saying that kinds in general are neither substantial nor phasal, but that they have substantial or phasal instances and that there is nothing to stop a given kind from having instances of both types. (Or, one might make this move with respect to some restricted set of kinds, which restricted set would include *sculpture*.) If this were so, then for a kind *K* of the relevant type, knowing nothing but that something was a *K*, one would not know whether it was a *K* essentially, and that on that *K*'s coming to be, something new came into existence, or whether it was a *K* only because it was in a certain phase, and that on its becoming a *K*, nothing new came into being. This is a radical

suggestion and would have consequences for many areas of philosophy; we certainly ought not to be pushed into it by a relatively local problem about ready-mades. It is also hard to see what, other than ad hoc intuition, would determine, in any particular case, whether an instance of a given kind was substantial or phasal. But the suggestion does seem to merit further consideration which I cannot undertake here.

The second vantage point from which one might deny that *sculpture* was a substantial kind would get around the problem just canvassed. Here the idea is that although the world does contain genuine substances of various kinds, no artefact kinds are substantial. The careful and deliberate sculptor who laboriously makes a figure of a human form does not bring anything new into existence; but nor does the shipwright, the wheelwright, or the candlestick-maker. There are different reasons that could lead one to this position but I suspect that a lot of what makes this view attractive to some can be found in two considerations. First, there is a general scepticism about the power of any finite agent to create.³⁰ Those humans whom we call creators must work with raw materials not of their own making, and can do nothing but arrange those materials. It is a common theme of medieval philosophy that what makes God a genuine creator is that, unlike human artisans who do not make their own raw materials, He not only fashions a world out of matter, but makes the matter *ex nihilo*.³¹ One need not accept the positive, theistic element of this view to embrace its denial of genuine creativity to those who work with pre-existing raw material. To this, another reason for not taking artefacts to be substances might be added. It is often taken as a mark of genuine, fundamental reality that it not depend on the thought of rational agents. This is because of a centuries-old idea that links reality to independence and self-sufficiency. The existence of a conceptual link between artefacts and intentionality on the part of their makers is thought to render them unfit to count as fundamentally real entities. So when we talk about a table, for example, we must really refer to some independent part of reality, a quantity of wood perhaps, that is describable in certain terms in virtue of facts about the intentional activity of a person with respect to it.

These two considerations are consistent with a wide variety of different metaphysical views. There are those who take reality itself to be unstructured matter distributed in space and time, and everything else, artefacts and natural entities, to be phases of matter at space–time regions.³² Or the world might be taken to contain a variety of fundamental

30 'Creation is the proper activity of God alone. Effects which are more universal need to be taken to more universal and original causes. Among all effects the most universal is existence itself, which should accordingly be the proper effect of the first and most universal cause, which is God.' Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.45.5, reply. Quoted from the Blackfriars edition.

31 'In respect of the form which artists impose upon material things from outside, we speak of Romulus as the founder of Rome, and Alexander of Alexandria, ascribing the foundation of those cities not to the architects and builders, but to the kings at whose will and by whose design and command they were built. How much more are we bound to call God the founder of natures; for he does not create from material which he himself did not make.' Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1972), 506 (XII.26).

32 This is roughly the view of Terry Horgan and Matjaž Potrč, 'Blobjectivism and Indirect Correspondence', *Facta Philosophica* 2 (2000), 249–270, and perhaps also of Alan Sidelle, *Necessity, Essence, and Individuation: A Defense of Conventionalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

substances that are not manufactured by intelligent agents (or perhaps by intelligent agents less than God), for example just those recognized by physics.³³ If mereological operations on these fundamental realities are themselves fundamental-reality-preserving, we can take entities such as artefacts and animals to be accidents of things that, in their most fundamental nature, are mereological constructs of atoms and their ilk. Here I say ‘accidents’ rather than ‘phases’ because the mereological operations will enable us to construct (or identify) entities (perhaps mereological aggregates of temporal parts of the fundamental physical entities) that never actually fail, at any time at which they exist, to be tables or tigers. It will remain true, however, that these mereological constructs are not essentially tigers or tables. What they are, in their fundamental natures, are mereological constructs of atoms (or whatever). Nor will there be any principles of reduction that tell us that any intrinsically similar mereological construction must be a table or tiger, since whether a given construction is correctly describable as a table or tiger might depend on its history or surroundings. (If the mereological operations are not fundamental-reality-preserving, then views of this kind will end up being eliminativist about any other objects than the ones dealt with by physics.)

Here is not the place for a general evaluation of these metaphysical approaches. I merely mention two points in connection with the current question of whether *sculpture* is a phasal or substantial kind. First, if someone wants to deflate the suggestion of ontological problems when thinking about ready-mades by denying that *sculpture* is a substantial kind, this is most naturally taken to be a way of contrasting the alleged product of the artist’s activity with the ordinary object—urinal, bottle rack, etc.—that that activity is directed at. The approach now under consideration, however, makes it as impossible to contrast the two cases as does full-blooded endorsement of the substantiality of the product of the artist’s ‘labour’. We thus end up throwing out the substantial baby with the phasal bathwater.

But secondly, and more importantly, I think we should question the motivations for the approach that derive from the two considerations mentioned: scepticism over the power of finite agents to bring things into existence; and commitment to the mind-independence of fundamental reality. Rather than starting with some conception of what reality is or must be like, and then seeing how, if at all, we can find a place within that scheme for artefacts, we might start our thinking by trying to understand what an artefact is. It is, I have claimed, the result of the imposition of conscious thought onto matter. If, by their activities, agents can impose their ideas and intentions onto matter, then such agents can be genuinely creative; they can bring new things into the world. Not new quantities of matter, of course, but new impositions of their minds onto existing matter. If all reality must be mind-independent, then the imposition of mind onto matter cannot count as creative. But why think that all reality must be mind-independent in such a way as to deny what is so plausible, that people do make new things by combining and working on existing things with the appropriate intentions? These thoughts, of course, are hardly conclusive and the whole issue requires much more discussion than I can give it here.³⁴ But at

33 The view of Theodore Sider, *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), and *Writing the Book of the World* (Oxford: OUP, 2012).

34 See my *Making Objects and Events*.

the very least, we may note how extensive are the metaphysical presuppositions involved in denying the substantiality of the kind *sculpture* for the reasons mooted here.

6. The Answers to (b) and (c)

Supposing, then, that we proceed on the assumption that *sculpture* and other artefactual kinds are substantial, this still leaves open the issues raised in (b) above as to whether any artefacts can be created by mere choice or thought alone. This was Zimmerman's worry: 'A piece of conveniently shaped driftwood becomes a coffee table by being brushed off and brought into the house, a urinal becomes a sculpture when hung on a wall in a museum and given a title ... But do we really believe that anything new comes into existence when we do such things?' And here the response must be that whether this is possible depends entirely on the nature of the artefact in question. Responding to the passage by Zimmerman quoted above, Lynne Baker writes:

If I saw a piece of driftwood and made up the word 'bonangle' on the spot, and thought to myself, 'It would be nice if the world contained bonangles; I hereby make that piece of driftwood a bonangle', I would not have brought into existence a new thing, a bonangle; our conventions and practices do not have a place for bonangles. It is not just thinking that brings things into existence.³⁵

In fact, Baker concedes more to Zimmerman here than she should, because she conflates two issues: what conditions must obtain for the kind *bonangle* to exist; and what conditions must obtain for an individual bonangle to exist. Since she gives no explanation of what a bonangle is in this passage, it is impossible to say whether her claim that she could not make one merely by saying, of a piece of driftwood, that it is (i.e. constitutes) a bonangle, is correct or not. For example, suppose bonangles were a variety of qua object, as theorized by Kit Fine, canonically describable as *a piece of driftwood qua declared to be (i.e. constitute) a bonangle*.³⁶ In order to bring about the existence of a qua object *O qua P*, it is sufficient, according to Fine, to make it the case that the object *O* come to have the property *P*. Hence, it would indeed be possible to make a bonangle by simply declaring of a piece of driftwood that it constitute a bonangle. If, however, bonangles were not qua objects of this kind, then one might not be able to bring one into existence so easily. Whether one can stipulate the existence of the kind *bonangle* is a different question, but one that need not concern us here. For if the conditions for any *kind* of artefact to exist are met, they are surely met for the kinds *coffee table* and *sculpture*, the kinds that feature in Zimmerman's sceptical remarks. Hence we need only be concerned with the question of how to bring into existence particular coffee tables or sculptures. Whether this can be done by choice or thought alone must depend on what a coffee table or a sculpture is.

So, we come to confront the question: is a sculpture the kind of thing that might be made by mere choice of the artist with respect to some object that would then come to constitute the newly created sculpture? And it is surely no stretch at all to see the efforts

³⁵ Baker, *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life*, 44.

³⁶ Fine, 'Acts, Events and Things', 97–105

of artists like Duchamp as parts of an ongoing, practical attempt to grapple with that very question. My point, indeed, is that that is precisely wherein much of the aesthetic interest of ready-mades lies. If it is right that *sculpture* is a substantial kind, then we seem to have two choices with respect to a work like *Fountain*, corresponding to affirmative answers to the questions raised as (b) and (c) above. (i) We can hold that a further object, a sculpture, is indeed made, an object which is distinct from the urinal and has the urinal as its matter. In that case, we have a hylomorphically complex object, the sculpture, and its matter, the urinal.³⁷ (ii) We can hold that Duchamp does not make a sculpture (or anything else) at all. There is only a urinal before he chooses it and there is only a urinal after. What is happening is that the urinal is being used as a sculpture, just as one may use a sandwich as a paperweight without actually making a paperweight at all.

Which of these is the right thing to say? The point of ready-mades is precisely that they confront us with these two options between which there is no definitive basis for decision. Is the artist effecting an imposture, passing off as a sculpture something that is not one? Is he, in the terms I used above, simply using a urinal as a work of art, although it is not one? Or is he demonstrating something about the nature of sculpture and about the creative powers of the artist, who can indeed make something new merely by selecting another, already-existing object?³⁸ We could declare ready-mades to be things that are passed off as sculptures if we had good reason to assert that no artefact can have another single artefact as its matter and that all apparent cases of such are really cases of using an *F* as a *G*. Or we could settle on the view that the artist really does create a new, hylomorphically complex object out of another merely by placing the latter in a gallery, if the phenomenon of using an *F* as if it were a *G* were not so salient. But the author of the ready-made works in an environment in which both possibilities loom large and the point of the exercise is to confront us with them. The point of the work, therefore, its aesthetic *raison d'être*, depends on the ontological possibilities I have described.

Not all the features of the situation, however, stem from the ontological framework alone. The ready-made would have been an impossibility in, say, thirteenth-century Paris even though the basic ontological framework I have described (more or less) was not only as applicable then as it is now, but was even believed to be correct by a large number of people. A great artist, at that time and in that place, could not have made art simply by selecting an existing object. And because (i) would have had no plausibility whatsoever, (ii), using something as a sculpture or work of art that was not in fact one, would have had a very different meaning from the one it came to have in Duchamp's time. To present

37 This view is affirmed by Joseph Margolis, *Art and Philosophy: Conceptual Issues in Aesthetics* (Atlantic Heights, NJ: Humanities Press, 1980), 20–21.

38 Obalk writes ('The Unfindable Readymade', ch. 6): 'Duchamp is not a magician nor a swindler who transforms, as with a magic wand, an ordinary object into a wonderful artwork. He is a thinker who expresses himself artistically.' I agree that Duchamp is a thinker who expresses himself artistically, but I am suggesting that that is because his work is such that we cannot say whether he is a 'magician' bringing into existence wonderful artworks by the magic wand of selection, or a swindler, passing off something as a sculpture that is not one. (I am assuming that Obalk's syntax is a solecism and that the phrase 'who transforms ...' should modify 'magician' but *not* 'swindler'. The magician is one who can do what the swindler only pretends to do.)

your noble patron with an ordinary chamber pot and claim you were presenting her with a sculpture made out of a chamber pot would have been at best a joke and at worst an insult. It is only owing to the development which art has undergone and the history it has accumulated that a stage was reached at which it became possible that an artist might be able to make a work of art merely by choosing something, and so the perplexing question of whether that is indeed what is happening with ready-mades or whether they are in fact just a joke, an insult, or a fraud (as (ii) would imply) arises.³⁹ And, of course, art reaches this point largely owing to the activities of the artists themselves. Hence my remark above about how the ready-made itself is part of a practical discussion about the nature of the concept *sculpture* and, by extension, *work of art*.

7. Single versus Multiple Objects

Fountain and its ilk, then, engage us in a complex interplay of aesthetic and ontological issues, centring on the question of what is required to bring a work of art into existence. In this respect, it is useful to compare such works with a work like Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998). In the case of *Fountain*, the fact that if there is a work distinct from its matter, then its matter is a single thing, ensures that the creation of the sculpture must be effected by selection rather than by a more ordinary kind of work.⁴⁰ But although a work like *My Bed* is sometimes described as a ready-made, Emin has done more than merely choose an existing object with this work. She has assembled a number of different things and put them together in a certain way.

The importance of this distinction was evident and salient to those in Duchamp's immediate circle. Katherine Dreier, one of the members of the board of the Society of Independent Artists, and a 'no' voter on whether to accept and display *Fountain*, wrote to Duchamp (on 13 April 1917) to explain her vote and to attempt to avert his resignation from the Society. In her letter she explains (at this point, not realizing that *Mutt* was Duchamp):

When I voted 'No', I voted on the question of originality—I did not see anything pertaining to originality in [*Fountain*] ... it was simply a question of whether a person has a right to buy a readymade object and show it with their name attached at an exhibition? Arensberg tells me that that was in accord with you [*sic*; your] 'Readymades', and I told him that was a new thought to me as the only 'readymades' I saw [in Duchamp's studio] were groups which were extremely original in their handling. I did not know that you had conceived of single objects.⁴¹

39 I rely here, of course, on Arthur Danto's Hegelian views about the history of art as expressed in, for example, 'The End of Art', in Berel Lang (ed.), *The Death of Art* (New York: Haven Publishing, 1984).

40 If Duchamp had worked on the urinal in an ordinary sense, filing it, deliberately chipping it, painting it, etc., then the case would, from an ontological point of view, be no different in principle from Michelangelo's work, say, on a piece of marble, by means of which he created the *David*. So the aesthetic point of the work would be quite different. (This is not to say that it might not have made a distinctive point by its use of an unusual medium, as did Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*.)

41 Quoted in Camfield, 'Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*', 73.

And for similar reasons, Obalk rejects as ‘real’ ready-mades most of the constructions by Duchamp that involve putting together several objects, such as *Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy?* A work of this kind ‘would require after all solving a problem of composition, and thus, it is no longer a readymade’.⁴²

In assemblages or constructions, the issue of whether an artefact can have a single, distinct artefact as its matter does not enter into the discussion. There is no question that a single artefact can be made out of a number of other artefacts, as the cases of ships, houses, and cars make clear (setting aside generic worries about creation). If Emin has created a single thing in putting together sheets, mattress, clothes (and some less salubrious items, some organic rather than artefactual), she has (1) done no more, but no less, than the house-builder or the shipwright. And (2) what she has created, the kind of artefact she has made, is surely something like a sculpture, or installation, or some other variety of work of art. If there is an artefactual ‘it’ in the case at all, in addition to the plurality of sheets and clothes, to what other kind could it belong? What Emin has created, furthermore, has the distinctive ‘metabolism’ associated with many hylomorphically complex objects. It can exchange parts of its matter over time, just as a house or a ship can. The very same work has been displayed with slight variations in the things of which it is made. (Apparently a noose was added when the work was displayed in Japan.) Some of the aesthetic issues that arise with *Fountain* arise too in the case of *My Bed*. What is the value or the point of going to a gallery to look at it? But the particular interplay between aesthetics and ontology that lies in the impossibility of saying definitively whether an artist is making something new or passing off something as a sculpture that is not one is missing in Emin’s work, as it is in Duchampian ready-mades such as *Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy?* Emin may, by making a sculpture or installation out of such mundane things, pose questions about *art*. But she does not, in addition, pose questions about what a *work of art* is, or what the creative power of the artist is, for she has certainly created a work, whatever its value. With Duchamp’s *Fountain*, it is part of the whole point to confront us with the question of whether anything has actually been created at all, never mind what its value is if something has been created.

8. Conclusion

I would say, therefore, that using examples like that of *Fountain* as the basis for an objection to the kind of hylomorphic theory I described, as Zimmerman does, fails to take such examples seriously enough. When we look at these works in the context of the relevant actions on the part of artists, viewers, museums, critics, and so on, we see that part of their point is to pose the question of whether something can be made merely by an artist’s selecting something, or more generally, by talk or thought about another object. The problems the works raise are not problems for a particular ontology; they are general, though historically specific, problems about what a work of art is, what the power of the artist is, and what the nature of artistic creation is. It is, in fact, a point *in favour* of a

42 Obalk, ‘The Unfindable Readymade’, ch. 2.

metaphysical theory that it not rule out categorically that one can bring into existence a sculpture, a new entity, by selecting an existing entity, a urinal, for an exhibition. A theory that does rule this out categorically makes it hard to understand the full range of what artists are doing in the production of ready-mades and why viewers are (or at least were, before art came to an end), quite appropriately, so exercised by them.⁴³

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