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# This is not my funny Valentine. This is the science of sleep.

Crystal Lyn Roethlisberger  
*University of Iowa*

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THIS IS NOT *MY FUNNY VALENTINE*. THIS IS THE *SCIENCE OF SLEEP*.

by

Crystal Lyn Roethlisberger

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the  
Master of Fine Arts degree in Art  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Anita Jung

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Crystal Lyn Roethlisberger

has been approved by the Examining Committee  
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts  
degree in Art at the May 2010 graduation.

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To HR: for whatever it's worth

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CHAPTER I  
THIS COULD BE CHAPTER EIGHT OR CONCLUSION: LAUNDRY LISTS

[Disclaimers.] This is the fourth attempt at a *thesis*. The first three versions were messy, grossly complicated, oversimplified, glossy lies. This is the fourth version and will be the final version. This is still an oversimplification but only for the sake of space. I am fully aware that the second half of this thesis is filler but the filler is important and specific.

[Confessions.] The reason this has been so hard to write is because I do not know how to talk about the things I have spent the last three years of graduate school making, except formally. I do not like to talk about my work and in general and I have spent the last three years avoiding speaking about my work. Instead, I have spent the better part of my graduate experience hiding under the guise of Minimalism (or Post-Minimalism) and also dancing around the topics of math (or quasi-math), phenomenology, opticality, and perception. It is amazing easy to do, evading conversations, but makes writing an artist statement difficult and then a thesis almost impossible. What I have done in the past three years, besides creating a pile of questionable objects, is become an expert on Duchamp and Minimalism and close to an expert on Warhol with the hope that the act of accomplishing these feats would help me to understand my own work. Instead, I have become significantly more disillusioned. I do not know what my work is. I do not know the function of my work. I do not know why I make things, why I need to make things, why I make the things I make, why my work looks as it does. I do not know what motivates me or why I am motivated to make things.

CHAPTER II  
THIS COULD BE CHAPTER SEVEN OR WORKING *DRAWINGS* AND OTHER  
VISIBLE THINGS NOT NECESSARILY MEANT TO BE VIEWED AS *ART*?<sup>1</sup>

I have become aware of my tendencies. My work seems to exist in *series*. A number of related or similar things, events, etc. are arranged in or occur in some kind of temporal, spatial, or other order. Each series seems to begin with a *premise*. The premise seems to be a basis, stated or assumed, on which reasoning proceeds or the series proceeds. Most premises seem to revolve around the loose theme of drawing and take the concept of *drawing* into consideration. Premises have included:

- *boundary*, something that indicates border(s) or limit(s),
- *space*, an area provided for a particular purpose,
- *architecture*: the structure of anything,
- *sequence*, the following of one thing after another (as opposed to *series*, or in association with *series*, or in response to *series*),
- *illusion*, a perception that represents what is perceived in a way different from the way it is in reality,
- *allusion*, a passing or casual reference or an incidental mention of something either directly or by implication,
- *delusion*, a false belief or opinion,

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<sup>1</sup> *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to be Viewed as Art* was a show at the Visual Arts Gallery, New York, in 1966. The curator was Mel Bochner. This show was a conceptual collaboration. It included work by Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, Eva Hesse, Sol LeWitt, Robert Mangold, John Cage, Dan Flavin, and others associated with the Minimalist camp. Also included were contributions from composers, mathematicians, choreographers, and engineers. The work was Xeroxed and then bound into four identical volumes that were then mounted on pedestals in the center of the gallery.



- *palindrome*, word, number, sentence, or verse that reads the same backward or forward,
- **and** *relationship*, a connection or association or involvement.

CHAPTER III  
 PREFACE: THIS IS NOT *MY FUNNY VALENTINE*<sup>2</sup>

There are certain elephants in the room that I have also specifically avoided talking about. I, with extreme reluctance have to finally admit that these have shaped my life. I realized the existence of these things and the necessity of defining them after a situation that went something like the following. I read an article about *Étant donnés* (appropriately titled *My Funny Valentine: Étant donnés*) and the recent retrospective of Duchamp's work at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The article was published in the January 2010 issue of Artforum. I was so upset by the article that I started the first version of my attempt of a thesis with a three page review of the article in which I explained in detail how badly written it was, how narrow minded and subjective the author was, how incorrect the facts were, how terrible the title was, etc.

I wrote these three pages, a couple days passed, I cooled down a little and then I realized that my own response to the article was as subjective and narrow minded and emotional as the response of the author of this article to *Étant donnés*, the exhibition situated around the piece, as well as the entire spectrum of Duchamp's work and I consequently recognized that the reasons for my anger, frustration, annoyance, and disdain were directly related to the idea of emotion and neither the author nor the article.

The author of the article, Helen Molesworth's, position on the oeuvre of

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<sup>2</sup> *My Funny Valentine* is a show tune from the 1937 Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart musical *Babes in Arms*. After being recorded by Chet Baker, Frank Sinatra and Miles Davis, the song became a popular jazz standard, appearing on over 1300 albums performed by over 600 artists. Also, as the text later states, *My Funny Valentine: Étant donnés* is the name of an article written by Helen Molesworth in the January 2010 issue of *Artforum*.

Duchamp's work is that its basis is desire; however, her presumption that *Étant donnés* equals the merger of three love affairs both physically and ideologically is presented in a way that disregards all traces of rationality in the implication that emotion was a factor in Duchamp's work. The thought of emotion – including its existence and its expression – makes me feel physically ill. I have spent the better part of my life evading the thing altogether and suddenly realized that I was capable of having an emotional response which meant that I must have emotions and must somehow express them (but not that well). I hated this article so much and hated myself all the more for hating it so much because I finally had to acknowledge that I saw emotion as a trivial human sensation. My own outlook is that as a factor in an artist's making work, if emotion is a factor then the work is possibly more approachable to a wider audience but the work is less interesting and less complex, especially if emotion is the only consideration in making work. The resulting work, spawned from emotion, is maybe not art but therapy. If emotion is a factor then the work is inevitably sentimental, personal, un-critique-able, superficial, one-dimensional, and probably feminine.

In reality, I think that the reason the word emotion (in all its forms) makes me nauseous is because I have been taught that it should make me nauseous and that fact upsets me the most. The elephants in the room, the *truths* that I need to confess to are (in no particular order):

1. I have spent the last three years being homesick, missing concrete and asphalt, shiny foreign cars, the Southern California freeway system, and built-in swimming pools.
2. I almost lost my Grandmother my second year here, the week of my MA show.

3. I lost my Grandfather (my Mom's father) a few weeks before I moved to Iowa and my other Grandfather the second week of my first year.
4. I have fallen for two people in the last three years. I fell for one person more than the other. Both people broke my heart. One person broke my heart more than the other.
5. My Father had quadruple bypass surgery three weeks ago.
6. I have a purple birthmark on my left cheek. People point it out daily. I have another birthmark that resembles a smashed butterfly on my lower back, a shade lighter than my freckles. I use to resent my freckles but now wish that the ones I use to have on my nose had not gone away.
7. My Mother and I had matching moles, each on our left arms, until last summer when I had mine removed. She still has a mole on her left arm and I, instead of a mole, have a scar that resembles a cigarette burn.
8. I have other scars that include a gap in my right eyebrow that no one can account for and also one under my chin that is also unaccounted for, a gash in my jaw line as the result of my wisdom teeth being removed, a spot leftover from a shingles outbreak behind my right ear (so I have heard), both left and right index fingers have healed from Exacto knife incidents, and my left knee has a half inch long healed BIC razor slash.
9. I use to play this game, maybe everyone has played this game, where I would say the same word over and over and over again until it no longer sounded like the original word and then I forgot how to say the original word and finally I forgot what the original word was. Almost any word works but some words work better than others. Once I started with the word FACETIOUS. Difficult. It only takes about three repetitions for the word to lose its character and its dignity.

10. When I was a kid I learned that Lifesavers Wint-O-Mint candies glow in the dark when exposed to saliva. My Grandmother has always preferred Certs Wintergreen candies but they do not glow in the dark. I have tested Certs for a phosphorescent glow and they have failed repeatedly.

11. My Mother has rheumatoid arthritis. It started to appear when she was in her late twenties. In the past two years it has become significantly more aggressive. She takes somewhat experimental medication once a month in the form of a shot. The medicine is delivered to my parent's house in a square styrofoam box. I am in my late twenties.

Birthmarks, scars, memories, pains, and all versions/variations of emotion are phenomena that have dictionary definitions but these definitions do not really mean anything because these phenomena are sensed and/or attached directly to memory or else are bodily and inherently human or like shadows, stains, vapor, and evanescence are based on experience(s) and are ephemeral. Their identities vary from person to person and from day to day and situation to situation. The words used to form these dictionary definitions are signs composed of symbols that are meant to serve, in combination, as a universal communication system. The symbol is either the actual word (a signifier) used to attach a name to a signified, the sound of the word used to name, or the aesthetic appearance of the written name (or word) on a page. Each use of a symbol is a different circumstance that attempts to attach a definition (a meaning) to the identity of each thing. A symbol is something that stands for something else, something concrete that represents another thing that cannot in itself be pictured, especially representing something that is abstract. A sign is a gesture expressing a command, wish, or thought. It is a symbol that expresses the existence of something else that is not immediately apparent.

What I mean to point out is basically and sadly that words fail. The problem is semantic, the difference between either the meaning of words or the meaning of symbols. (a.) If I do not know how to talk about these things (these phenomena), and (b.) if the objects I make are informed by these things, and (c.) my own visual language does not correspond with the English language, then (d.) it makes sense that I do not know how to talk about my work. What I am trying to describe (imply) is the inherent loss of meaning between my intent as an artist, which I do not exactly understand to begin with, and the visual manifestations of my intent, and then the further loss of meaning through the translation of my intent from my own personal visual language to another language with a different vocabulary, a foreign set of symbols, and grammatical rules.

## CHAPTER IV ONE: GIVEN

My work is not about Minimalism, Post-Minimalism, Duchamp, Warhol, or any other disguise it seems to hide in at some point or other in time. My work is informed by each of these things in some way and I think it is important to talk about these relationships in conjunction to myself and to my work.

The first relationship is to Minimalism. I like the work of the Minimalists but also recognize the failure of Minimalism. What defined Minimalist work was a stripping down of the work to what was considered to be its essence, the *gestalt*. Drawing or sculpture was not assumed to be *drawing* or *sculpture* anymore but instead each was presumed to be an *object* (again, presumed to be an art object) transformed into a *thing* (an entity) stripped of all metaphorical aspects. To reach the moment of the gestalt, the whole of the object must amount to the sum of its parts. Why Minimalism was only a moment is because the attempt of the Minimalists to strip the image (painting) and the object (sculpture) down to the essence, the gestalt, of each was a complete failure. Let me retract. Minimalism was a success because the gestalt of the art object was reached but it was simultaneously a failure in the sense that the gestalt of the art object was reached. Reaching the gestalt was equivalent to the absolute end (i.e. failure) because the resulting situation was the potential end of the art object and/or the end of an art making practice.

What happened next, after attaining the gestalt, was obviously that the fact that a set of artists had reached the point of the gestalt was recognized and then an either/or condition. There is no such thing as the gestalt of the gestalt so *either* nothing more could happen – nothing else had to be made, needed to be made, could be made because this was seen as the end – *or* the gestalt was taken as an opportunity for the reconstruction of

meaning. In the latter case, the gestalt was deemed a premise, a *what if?*, which served as the basis for another set of premises that could destroy the gestalt, build on it, reconstruct it, deconstruct it, decorate it, question it, etc.

The second relationship is to Duchamp, especially in that he abandoned painting to play chess and make work that maybe was not art (but then again maybe was art). Duchamp was born the same year the safety bicycle was invented and Duchamp died in 1966, the same year as the *Primary Structures* show at the Jewish Museum in New York, the show that defined the Minimal moment and the Minimal aesthetic. He also invented the readymade and reached the moment of the gestalt decades before the Minimalists. He spent the last twenty years of his life, up until his death, working on his final piece, *Étant donnés*, a large cubic diorama, that was the answer to the *what if?* of the gestalt (the readymade). *Étant donnés* was revealed postmortem and moved to the Philadelphia Museum of Art from his studio (or apartment) in New York. The full name for *Étant donnés* is *Given/1<sup>st</sup> the waterfall/2<sup>nd</sup> the illuminating gas*. The viewer of the piece enters a small, dark room and must look through a set of eyeholes in a pair of Spanish doors in order to view a scene comprising a lifelike nude situated within a landscape containing a sparkling waterfall. The female nude lies on a bed of twigs and holds a lamp containing the illuminating gas in her uplifted left hand.

*Étant donnés* is a reinterpretation of the *Large Glass*. Most noticeably, *Étant donnés* is three-dimensional while the *Large Glass* is two-dimensional. *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, the full title for the *Large Glass*, is not only the nine foot tall etched plane of glass but the entire piece is this object plus the *Green Box* plus the sets of notes that are the basis for the conceptualization and execution of the



*Large Glass* and were recreated for inclusion in the *Green Box*.<sup>3</sup> The *Large Glass* was created based on ideas about the fourth dimension and also perspective and geometry (Euclidean and non-Euclidean). In sharp contrast, neither the conception nor the fabrication of *Étant donnés* was based on either notes or sets of notes but instead was based on photographs, memories, sensations, sight, human experience(s) (, and casts of human bodies).

*Étant donnés* equals narcissism plus voyeurism and is probably (I will agree with the afore mentioned article) a conglomeration of three different romantic relationships. Let me state some facts about Duchamp's love life, just to add fuel to the fire. As documented, Duchamp was engaged in three different romances (at least in his adult life) that did not overlap. The first was with Mary Reynolds, a bookbinder. Their affair spanned several decades and when she died she left money to him that he used to fund himself and his work. (Specifically the money was used to fund *Étant donnés*). The physical backdrop of *Étant donnés* is based on a series of photographs of a waterfall taken while the two were traveling in Switzerland. The second romantic affair was with the Brazilian artist Maria Martins. This relationship is documented by the exchange of love letters between 1946 and 1952. The body of the figure of *Étant donnés* is a cast of Maria Martins. Originally the hair on the figure was brown like Martin's hair but was

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<sup>3</sup> The *Green Box* (or *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*) (1934) is a limited edition of notes on scraps of paper that details Duchamp's own explication of his masterpiece *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (*The Large Glass*) (1915–23). Containing one color plate, ninety-three notes, and photographs and facsimiles by Duchamp, the green-flocked cardboard box – produced in an edition of 320 – is a compilation of the artist's creative thought process during the conception (while in Paris and New York) and execution (while in New York) of *The Large Glass*. It is an essential counterpart to the material work it describes verbally.

later changed to blond, because Teeny's hair was blond. Which leads me to the third and final love affair with his wife Teeny Matisse later in life. It is documented that he was completely loyal to her. I believe he was loyal to her. The arm of the figure of *Étant donnés* is that of his wife Teeny. One hot summer the original arm melted. The arm cast from Martins fell off and needed to be replaced and so the missing arm was replaced with a cast of Teeny's arm.

The third relationship I recognize in my own work is to the Pop artist Andy Warhol who began in the 1960s among other projects, re-producing Brillo boxes that shared the form of the cube with the Minimalists and the idea of the readymade with Duchamp. Pop Art and Minimalism developed simultaneously, parallel to each other. Both were a reaction to the emotion of Abstract Expressionism and specifically to the intent of Abstract Expressionism to create work as a visual mirror of the artist's psyche in order to lead the viewer of the work to a higher consciousness. Pop was also a reaction to the machismo of Abstract Expressionism. In being macho, Abstract Expressionism was a success and in reaching a higher consciousness, Abstract Expressionism failed. The attempt of Pop was to be approachable, non-macho, and to not evoke an emotional response since grounded in popular culture. In these respects, Pop also failed.

These are the few things I do know how to talk about (meaning Minimalism, Warhol, Duchamp). Relative to these and myself is also the readymade so I will latch onto the topic of the readymade and attempt to use the character of the readymade to also describe the theory of the infra-thin, a conceptual entity coined by Duchamp which is neither a noun nor a verb but an adjective and is based in the realm of the senses.

My hope (intent in discussing the readymade and the infra-thin) is to:

- a.) define what a readymade is and then use the readymade as a concrete and identifiable example to use to describe the identity of an art object,
- b.) take the readymade as a given (assume it to be the gestalt) and then explain its different manifestations (the different *what if?s*),
- c.) take one of these *what if?s* to be the concept of the infra-thin,
- d.) babble somewhat incoherently about the infra-thin all the while realizing that the infra-thin and the readymade are the same thing. Both are experienced situations as opposed to entities that can be defined through language,
- e.) and finally I will leave this thesis at that (d.).

CHAPTER V  
TWO: THIS IS *THE SCIENCE OF SLEEP*<sup>4</sup>

To begin a conversation about the readymade, I will first define the readymade as an anonymous, neutral object that is taken at face value as “work of art”.<sup>5</sup> It exists as a neutral object because of an artist’s deeming it art and so its identity is not utilitarian or commodity or functionless but instead the object resides as this exclusive *entity* whose identity equals art object. It is seen out of the corner of the viewer’s eye, recognized as this anonymous thing that equals art object, and is then forgotten about. It is only recollected by memory as *readymade* as opposed to the object that it might resemble. Duchamp’s readymades can be lumped in several categories such as what follows (these are very broad and probably need to be subdivided and also some categories overlap).

The development of the Duchamp readymade is something like the following list:

**Item.** The readymade began as an object, pulled from its original context. Originally the readymade was physical (actually existed and was touchable) but then transformed into something with the option of also being imaginary (and/or liminal).

**Action:** The readymade became an act, a means of (or result of) choosing and inscribing. These are either kinetic (move or at the very least imply movement) or are stationary.

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Gondry wrote and directed the film *The Science of Sleep*. The main character of the film is Stéphane. He is imaginative and he is in his twenties. The premise of the film goes something like Stéphane has vivid dreams that often interfere with his ability to interact with reality. And, this is so much the case that often he cannot tell dreams from reality.

<sup>5</sup> Originally and specifically suits (but clothing in general) were sown by tailors and in the era of Duchamp clothes started to be available already made. The term coined, used to define clothes to buy that were already made, was *readymade*. The word (or a variation of the word) readymade began to appear on the windows of tailor’s shops and this is possibly where Duchamp found the term, especially in moving from France to New York during the time when it began to be possible, as well as popular, to buy clothes already made.

**Notion:** The readymade developed into a mental object; first as a game with rules, second as an optical illusion, and third by returning to the figure but by presenting the figure as commodified “self”. These (or this manifestation) can also be liminal.

The original *readymades* (the original objects deemed readymades by Duchamp) were later recreated by Arturo Schwarz in the 1960s and reproduced in multiples, in editions. Most of the original Duchampian readymades were either lost or discarded, mistaken for trash as opposed to identified as art objects. I enjoy the originals, as I know them from photographs. The reproductions are copies of objects that look similar to the originals, but most of the reproductions have a marshmallow quality, bubbly or cartoonish. Original, replica, photograph of either original or replica, the original readymade is not the original object and it is not the reproduced object. Instead, the readymade is

- the idea of deeming an ordinary thing an art object and
- it is the idea of the entire oeuvre of all objects that are called by the name of that object standing as spokesperson for that object and
- it is the reality that one specific object acts as art object yet all others that resemble it are not treated as art objects but could potentially be treated as art objects or else could instead be mistaken for either art objects or utilitarian objects.

An example might be helpful. There was an original *Bottlerack* and it was destroyed. It exists in photographs but it was most likely disposed of as trash. Duchamp bought the original bottlerack at a French department store, and if Duchamp did not buy it at a French department store then someone else did and Duchamp happened upon it. Either way, the original existed and Duchamp deemed it art. The department store that the original bottlerack came from still exists and so I can go to the same French

department store and buy a bottlerack that closely resembles the original bottlerack and carry it back to the United States, checked with my luggage. Also, I can find a bottlerack at a thriftstore, for sale for a miniscule amount, that has a possibility of being the original discarded bottlerack but otherwise can be simply some other bottlerack, not the original. Furthermore, I can buy a bottlerack on the Williams Sonoma website in a shade of lime green to match my kitchen and have it mailed to me, wherever in the world I might be living. Whichever the case, my bottlerack is more of the original readymade than Duchamp's original bottlerack because the *art* of the object is the idea of an object being designated art as opposed to the reality of the object being a physical piece of art. Of the three scenarios, I would like to think the second choice is the most *Bottlerack* of any of the possibilities, whether it happens to be the original or not.

#### Parallel Synchronized Randomness<sup>6</sup>

An anomaly within Duchamp's oeuvre of readymades is the *Erotic Objects*, which were created simultaneously with *Étant donnés*.<sup>7</sup> These offspring of the elaborate diorama were copied in small bronze editions (reproduced) and include *Untitled (erotic object)*, 1959; *Feuille de vigne femelle (Female fig leaf)*, 1950; *Objet-dard (Dart-Object)*, 1951; *Coin de chasteté (Wedge of Chastity)*, 1954. They are byproducts of the process of

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<sup>6</sup> *Parallel synchronized randomness* is the term used in the film *The Science of Sleep* to describe the phenomena of the similitude of dreams and reality.

<sup>7</sup> *Erotic Objects* is the designation or category name given to these objects. The title, or group title, is not mine. The objects are deemed *erotic* because of sexual references due to their physical appearances, not because they are meant to arouse the viewer either by appearance or by usage – although they might, inadvertently. I do not intend to dismiss the sexual implications of the *Erotic Objects* and only talk about them formally. I also do not intend to imply that either there is no likelihood that someone could be aroused by these objects and, then the reverse, that someone could possibly be aroused by these objects and that a reaction of sexual arousal because of these objects is completely silly. This group of objects is blatantly sexy and this is why I have chosen to speak about them.

making *Étant donnés*, all except *Wedge of Chastity* but it fits with the group. It is associated with the group first because of sexual connotations due to its physical appearance, its shape plus the sensuality of the materials used to make it (bronze and bubble gum pink dental plastic), second because it was also made in secret (simultaneously with *Étant donnés*), and third because it was also originally created in the process of casting something else. It is a castoff like the other *Erotic Objects* but not a castoff from the process of making *Étant donnés*. *Wedge of Chastity* was given to Teeny as a wedding present and evidently Teeny enjoyed carrying it around. They all have sexual connotations, reading most blatantly as vaginal, but of the four objects, *Objet-dard* is by far undeniably phallic. Its name alone gives it away: a play on words that goes something like objet d'art (art object) versus *dard*, in French the word for penis. *Objet-dard* plays with mold and cast reversals as well as gender reversals. Is it a vaginal mold or an object used for the casting of vaginas? In reality, the object came from the armature used to support the breast of the figure for *Étant donnés* during the casting process. *Female fig leaf* toys with the potential reversibility of mold and cast also. This object could either be a mold to make castings that would reveal a female's private parts or else an object that could be used to conceal the same private parts.

The *Erotic Objects*, collectively, characterize a shift from the original readymades. Let me backtrack a little. The *Erotic Objects* are physically different in that they are not recognizable objects. The original readymades, the objects (as opposed to the text pieces, or linguistic readymades, or readymades that never really existed, or the readymades like the *Woolworth Building* that are large and not own-able), were mass produced commodity objects. They were normal everyday objects selected, altered,

and/or recontextualized. The *Erotic Objects* are the same as the original readymades in that they are tangible objects. Both are abstract physically, but the originals less abstract because we associate their forms with recognizable objects with a utilitarian purpose. The *Erotic Objects* are also familiar, but in a different way than the original readymades like the *Bottlerack*, since they are phallic or vaginal or at the very basic level bodily.

I understand the commercial objects and the *Erotic Objects* are the same thing, both are readymades. However, the commodity objects exist as first generation readymades while the Schwarz editions exist as second, third (, fourth, etc.) generation readymades (valid reproductions of the originals). The *Erotic Objects*, the originals, were first generation readymades at some point also but their conception occurred in the process of casting another object, the figure of *Étant donnés*. So, as opposed to the origin(s) of the original readymades, the *Erotic Objects* started their lives as second and third generation readymades but then their development, the fact that they were reproduced in multiples, was treated the same as the other readymades.

#### Elemental Parallelism<sup>8</sup>

A photograph of Duchamp's studio, taken around 1918, shows the circumstances of disarray that must have distinguished the artist's studio practice.<sup>9</sup> This photograph

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<sup>8</sup> *Elemental Parallelism* or (*Elementary Parallelism*) is a term Duchamp mentions specifically in *A I'Infinif*, the *White Box*. The easiest visual reference to the use of Elemental Parallelism is Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* where compositionally elements of the image (objects in the image, here the figure,) move parallel to one another at a diagonal across the picture plane and consequently are stretched like elastic. Mathematically, objects slip into the fourth-dimension via a hinge. The 4D axis is perpendicular to the 3D axis. When a three-dimensional object is rotated over a two-dimensional axis, a hinge, it enters the 4D. In the fourth-dimension the 3D is inverted (turned inside out) but remains parallel to its three-dimensional counterpart(s).

<sup>9</sup> The photograph referenced is included as an illustration in David Joselit's book *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp 1910-1941*.



exists in reproductions and it is highly likely that it has been altered. The image I have is small and dusty. I have searched for other versions of the photograph, versions that are clearer (less pixilated) and larger. The other versions I have found are tinted with watercolor or obviously the products of bad Photoshop-ing because shadows do not match and items are undoubtedly copied and pasted into a background. It is possible that the original image was created in the darkroom or else created before either the bandaid or clone stamp tool existed (in Photoshop). Duchamp and Man Ray were known to manipulate images in the darkroom so it could have been the two of them who created the image or else it was someone later on. For me, it does not really matter if the original image was altered or if what I have in my possession is a fabricated image because the main items in the image are what matter to me. I have seen these items in other photographs of Duchamp's studio, in similar arrangements and similar circumstances as well as in different yet similar variations.

Amidst the dust, papers, miscellany are three items that illustrate where Duchamp's interests lie as well as characterize his artistic output beginning in the late teens and extending into the 1920s (and even further). In this photograph the *Bicycle Wheel* stands in the left corner, a chessboard hangs on a wall, and finally at the center of the photograph a coatrack is nailed to the floor. These are the items I have seen in multiple photographs of Duchamp's studio(s), in various exhibitions, in different manifestations, and also in an assortment of altered photographs (admittedly altered, based on documentation, by Man Ray or Duchamp or the two as a duo).

The coatrack, *Trebuchet*, becomes an obstacle both inside and outside the context of Duchamp's studio. *Trebuchet* means a trap in chess, a move consisting of sacrificing a

pawn in order to have the opponent trip over it and nailed to the floor, the coatrack remains a trap. A visitor to the studio will:

- a. trip on it;
- b. trip on it and want to move it;
- c. notice it, not trip on it, and want to move it;
- d. notice it, not trip on it, and step over it;
- e. trip on it, want to move it, and not be able to move it;
- f. notice it, not trip on it, want to move it, and not be able to move it.

*Trebuchet* is too close to life to be considered art. Its form, no matter in what configuration, is so familiar as COATRACK that it can only be read as a utilitarian object.

*Trebuchet* is too far away from art to be considered art. When placed on the wall it is functional and utilitarian, a place to hang a coat, and when on the floor *Trebuchet* is topographical, but still a coatrack (just displaced). It is not a sculpture because it is not on a pedestal. *Trebuchet* is also too close to art to be considered art. It never reads as sculpture, although treated as an object, because it is too familiar and then never reads as painting either, although hung on the wall, because it is again too familiar. Instead, *Trebuchet* is always a trap. The readymade is always a trap.

CHAPTER VI  
 “MADAM, I’M ADAM”, OR PALINDROMES, AND PEANUT BUTTER

The infra-thin, infrathin, infra thin or else inframince, infra-mince, infra mince is all the same thing. Duchamp coined the term and wrote the word differently in different situations (in different sets of notes) but all versions have the same definition. For the sake of my own fondness of spelling and punctuation, I will use the spelling infra-thin.

There is not a large amount of writing devoted specifically to the theory of the infra-thin but Duchamp, both in his notes and in interviews, consistently hints at difference and difference/inframince, obvious rhyme. The most blatant example of Duchamp speaking of the infra-thin appears on the back cover of *View*, 5, no. 1 (March 1945). On the front cover of this issue of the magazine is an image of a puff of smoke.

The back cover reads:

WHEN  
 THE TOBACCO SMOKE  
 ALSO SMELLS  
 OF THE MOUTH  
 WHICH EXHALES IT  
 THE TWO ODOURS  
 ARE MARRIED BY  
 INFRA-MINCE.<sup>10</sup>

*Mince* equals thin in French. Infra-thin is always an adjective and never a noun. A noun is a thing (person, place, object, idea, something physical and something tangible) whereas an adjective describes a noun or pronoun. Duchamp, although he coined the term, did his best to not attach a verbal definition to it but instead found it more rational to describe (or define) it through examples. I previously touched on the disconnect

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<sup>10</sup> Nesbit, Molly, “Last Words (Rilke, Wittgenstein) (Duchamp)”, *Art History*, no. 4 (December 1998): 547.

between words and experience and the difficulty (actually the often impossibility) of attaching a word (a sign) to something that does not want, does not need, or does not have an adequate modifier, especially in a particular language. I hesitate in describing the infra-thin by way of metaphor, one thing being like something else. Also, I am unwilling to define it by way of allegory, a symbolic representation, because the infra-thin bypasses allegory. Allegory uses words, the first downfall, and elicits a story with a potentially parable-like moral. I do not like parables.

The worst description of the infra-thin is with words because first, passage through the infra-thin does not occur with words and second, the infra-thin is found in the passage between senses. Words can be used to describe a situation that involves the infra-thin but not to describe the passage that is the infra-thin. Or, words can be used to define the two bookends of the infra-thin (such as the cigarette and the smoke) but not the gap between the two.

What the infra-thin talks about, or flirts with, or is akin to is poetry. Poets use words in a different way than the average person uses words. This situation is similar to how a house painter uses paint versus the way a *painter* (the artist form) uses paint. Words give an approximate translation of both the conscious and the concrete. The problem is that the same words are used to describe seeing and feeling (the concrete and the abstract, or the physical and the sensual, or the concrete and the sensual, or the abstract and the physical). Once, in an interview with Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp blurted out “everything is tautology, except black coffee because the senses are in control! The

eyes see the black coffee, the senses are in control. . .”<sup>11</sup> What he hints at, maybe not so eloquently in this situation but all the more effectively since his statement is without a doubt laced with a certain amount of passion (and immediacy), is the difference between aesthetics and grammar. Aesthetics is not science. In science there is a premise, a theorem, and then the premise is tested and, in a perfect world, either found to be true or false. Tautology, in contrast, is a repetition of premises and grammar is tautology in that it is a set of rules for speaking or writing a specific language.

Although Duchamp said that everything except black coffee is tautology, I am suggesting that the infra-thin is also not tautology. The concept of the infra-thin eludes scientific definitions on purpose. Infra-thin is not grounded in the fourth-dimension because the fourth-dimension is the realm of math and science, which is often based on speculation, but instead the infra-thin is grounded in the realm of the third-dimension which is conceivable and able to be visualized with the eye or through touch or smell (etc.). The third-dimension is the realm of everyday senses and experiences. The theory of the infra-thin was initially conceived with the idea of (or was invented with the intent of) describing (and defining) a term that accounted for slight, wasted energies. If this were physics then it would be known as something like inertia, except that inertia is characterized as potential stored energy at rest and this is decidedly not physics but still energy is being emitted.

Duchamp chose an everyday word (or set of words) instead of a scientific sounding term so that the concept would not sound like something made in a laboratory or something qualified through scientific studies and experiments. Still, infra-thin exists

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<sup>11</sup> Singer, Thomas, “In the Manner of Duchamp, 1942-47: The Years of the ‘Mirrorial Return’”, *Art Bulletin*, no. 2 (June 2004): 346, 362-363.

like a mathematical cut, like a cut in the fabric of time. The infra-thin is not a thing in itself but instead reveals itself in phenomena by means of separations, separations that produce difference, and also immeasurable transitions between one thing and another. I have used the terms phenomenon and phenomena previously but now realize that both might be words that carry too much romantic baggage. Infra-thin was invented to name slight, wasted energies but soon it became more important in that the idea developed as a concept to talk about paradoxes in the everyday world. A paradox is something absurd and a phenomenon is something marvelous. I enjoy the idea of a paradox more than that of a phenomenon simply because an absurdity is not definable whereas something marvelous elicits a kind of explanation, maybe even scientific. What I am discussing is decidedly not science but in some instances I need science because sometimes I need a concrete answer (or at the very least an explanation that has some sort of tangible grounding in the physical world).

The infra-thin exists between the senses but it is not a sense (and also is not the conglomeration of all senses, in general, in themselves) because a sense is a thing and a thing is a noun. It might be a good time to define *sense* and distinguish between sense, sensor, and sensory. To *sense*, the verb, means to detect automatically. We perceive by our senses. The senses are the means that a person obtains information about the physical world. Human senses (this is the noun form of the word) include sight, sound, smell, touch, taste. A sensor is a device that responds to a physical stimulus. Sensory relates to sensation and the sense organs. The term sense, suggests a form of intelligence that is not learned but intuitive. Duchamp's examples begin with a sense, or a set of senses, and then suggest the slight, wasted energies that occur between the set of senses or occur as a

result of a sense or as one passes from one sense to another sense. The senses Duchamp touches on when he defines the infra-thin are:

1. olfactory: “When tobacco smoke smells also of the mouth that exhales it, the two odors are married by [the] infra-thin.<sup>12</sup>”,
2. auditory: “The sound, or the music that a pair of corduroy velvet pants makes when the two legs brush against one another reveals the infra-thin.<sup>13</sup>”,
3. tactile: “Or the hollowness between the two sides of a very thin piece of paper.<sup>14</sup>” or “between the front and back of a thin sheet.<sup>15</sup>”,
4. thermal: Heat rising from a chair that someone has recently been seated on/in<sup>16</sup>, and
5. temporal: The schism between the blast of a gun and the appearance of the bullet hole in a target<sup>17</sup>.

Again, the infra-thin is an adjective and it is also a paradox. If it was an actual entity it could be inertia but it could also be characterized as a sleight of hand, like having your wallet stolen or witnessing a magic trick. A magician finds a quarter behind my ear. I did not know it existed there. Where did it come from? and when did it find its way there without me noticing? The logical way to describe the infra-thin, as related to a sleight of hand, is to talk about memory. The reality of memory is that it is based in the past, also it cannot be captured and held onto, furthermore it remembers what it wants to remember, and finally, the cliché is correct, it fades. Another characteristic of memory is

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<sup>12</sup> Singer, 362.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 357, 362.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 357.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 357.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 362.

<sup>17</sup> Nesbit, 549.

that it leaves an imprint. We remember things but not exactly; however, we think we still remember things as we originally saw them. There are certain types of memory, such as déjà vu. In contrast to memory, déjà vu is a feeling, something that happens before or after the fact. Déjà vu could be a dream and the experience it recollects (or thinks it recollects) could possibly never have occurred. Memory covers a wide range of incidences from realizations of difference between what are thought to be identical, like between the actual experience and the recollection of the same experience. Inevitably, memory accounts for innumerable conglomerations of homogeneous or, at the very least, unbelievably generic generalizations. Fortunately, because of the reality of the personality of memory one can blame memory for more than seems logical. When differences are so minute, differences are lost to memory.

I would like to return again to the example of me repeating the word *facetious* until I forgot its correct pronunciation (no. 9, page 6, Chapter 3). The pronunciation of the original word and the state of eventual bewilderment are the two bookends of the infra-thin. The process of, and reality of, verbal confusion is the infra-thin as well as proof of (and then documentation of) what happens in the infra-thin being, in this instance,

- a.) the lack of connection between written words and spoken words and
- b.) the likelihood of both written and spoken words easily losing their meanings and
- c.) proof that the rules of grammar are such that if a word does not sound like it is suppose to sound (of if it is not used as it is suppose to be used) then it kind of fails as a word (as a means of communication) and
- d.) their should be a *d* but it is still coming to me.



I am not sure how to most eloquently describe what I want *d* to say but I will go ahead and attempt to explain myself anyway. This same verbal confusion might happen when I play this game but it also happens when

- I attempt to make an object based on something happening in my head, and
- I try to describe the object (it being made based on something happening in my head) after I have made it, and
- a viewer of the object I have made attempts to associate with the object, and
- a viewer (either the same viewer or another viewer) tries to talk about the object I have made after they have attempted to associate with it.

Although failing at traditional verbal communication, everyone who has played this game understands what happens. A word is recognized as a sound and then fails as a sound and the gap between the initial sound and the final sound is understood as the confusion between the first word and the last word arrived at and neither word makes sense out of the context of the language(s) they are part of. The preceding few paragraphs (and lists) considered, if the game is totally and completely successful then the participant forgets the initial word and forgets how to pronounce the initial word but still retains some inkling of what the beginning word was.

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