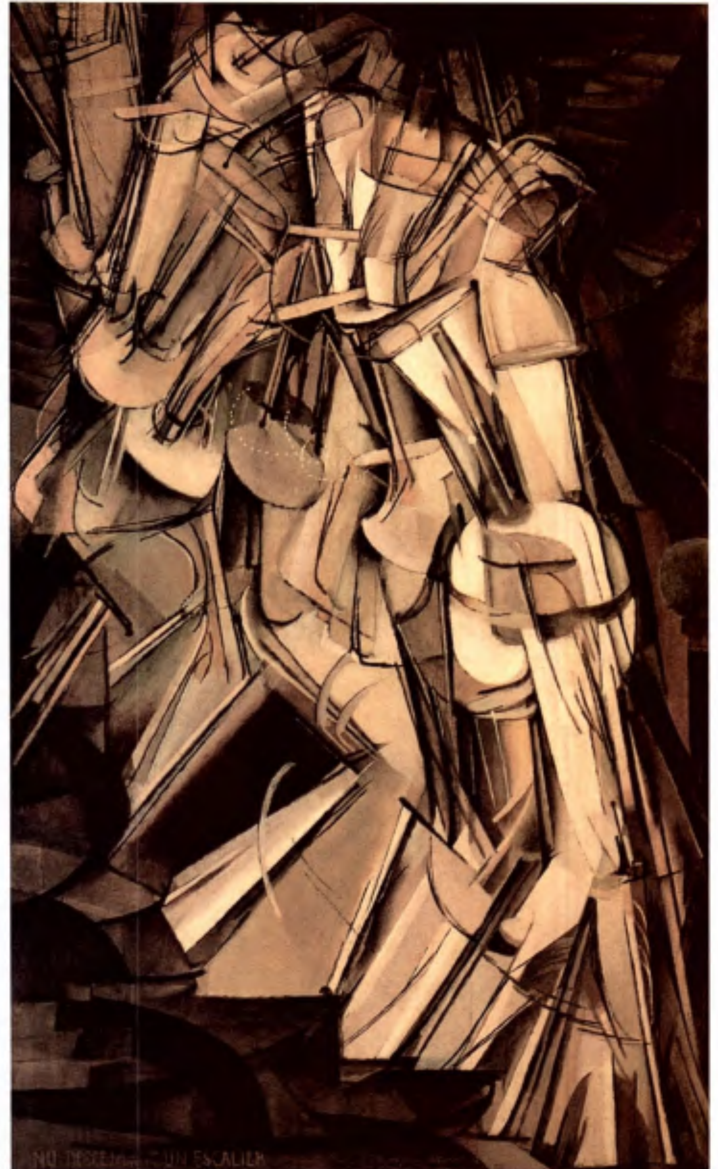
1914

Vladimir Tatlin develops his constructions and Marcel Duchamp proposes his readymades, the first as a transformation of Cubism, the second as a break with it; in doing so, they offer complementary critiques of the traditional mediums of art.

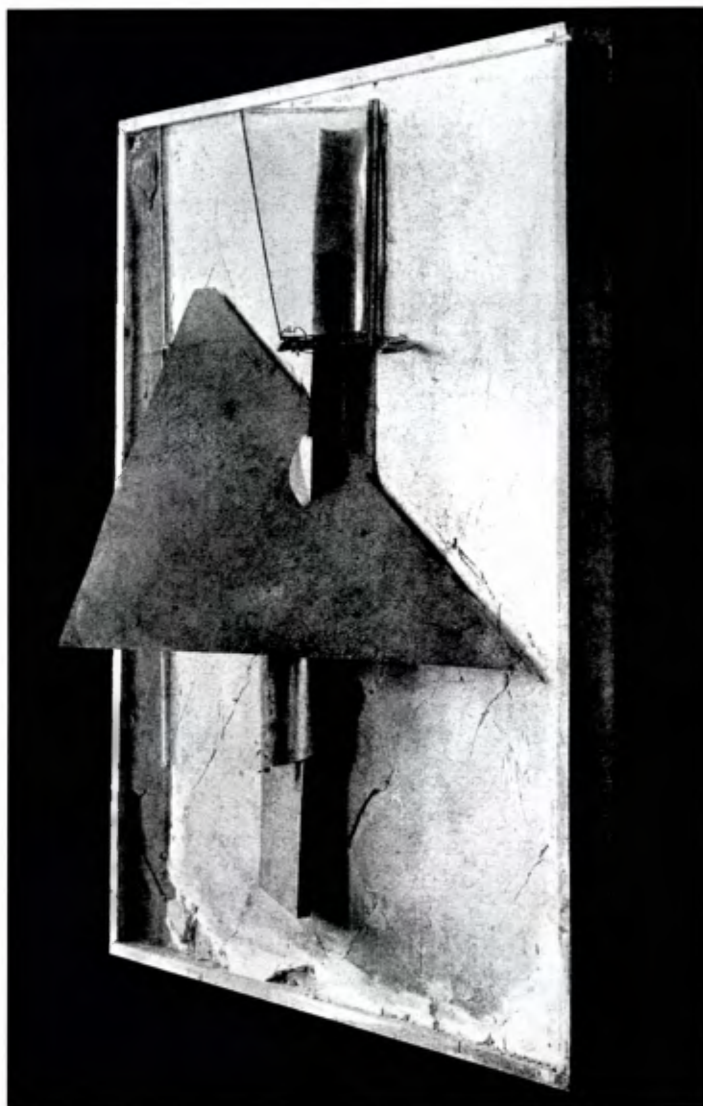
The years 1912–14 were momentous ones in the avant-garde. New forms of picture-making such as abstraction and ▲ collage broke with representational painting, and new forms of object-making such as the construction and the readymade challenged figurative sculpture, as the old focus on the human body was displaced by new explorations of industrial materials and commercial products. These developments were internal to modernist art, but they were also influenced by external events, such as the increased industrialization and commodification of everyday life, which was far more advanced in the Paris of Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) than in the Moscow and St. Petersburg of Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953). At the same time, these new objects seemed almost to anticipate such worldly transformations. The first Tatlin constructions preceded the Russian Revolution in 1917, while the first Duchamp readymades predated the commodity culture of the twenties. "What happened from the social aspect in 1917," Tatlin wrote, "was realized in our work as pictorial artists in 1914, when 'materials, volume, and construction' were accepted as our foundations." Such materialist ● foundations were achieved in Constructivist art, Tatlin implies, *before* they were established in Communist society.

Yet the breaks marked by the construction and the readymade were not as punctual or as final as we often like to think. Art historians favor the dramatic convenience of the signal event: Duchamp, pressed by his own brothers to withdraw his Cubist painting *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* [1] from the Salon des Indépendants in the spring of 1912, abandons painting altogether; or Tatlin, on a visit to Paris in the spring of 1914, encounters the Cubist constructions of Picasso and proceeds directly to his own reliefs. These events did occur, but they were not simple causes; indeed, the readymade and the construction must be seen as complementary responses to two overdetermined developments. First, Duchamp and Tatlin were responding in different ways to a crisis in representation signaled by Cubism. Second, that crisis had revealed a truth about "bourgeois" art, both academic and avant-garde, to which the two artists were also responding—that it was presumed to be autonomous, separate from social life, an institution in its own right. "The category *art as institution* was not invented by the avant-garde movements," the German critic Peter



1 • Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2*, 1912
Oil on canvas, 147 × 89.2 (57⅞ × 35⅛)

▲ 1912, 1913 ● 1921b



2 • Vladimir Tatlin, *Selection of Materials: Iron, Stucco, Glass, Asphalt*, 1914
Dimensions unknown

▲ Bürger writes in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974). "But it only became recognizable after the avant-garde movements had criticized the autonomy status of art in developed bourgeois society." Once valued as the sign of artistic freedom, according to Bürger, this autonomy had become the mark of its "social ineffectuality," and this in turn prompted "the self-critique of art" advanced paradigmatically by Duchamp and Tatlin.

The material dictates the form

Tatlin was born in the Ukrainian city of Khar'kov to a poet-mother and an engineer-father who was an expert on American railroads. Although active in the Cubo-Futurist avant-garde by 1907–8, Tatlin remained a sometime sailor (likely a ship's carpenter) until 1914–15. These facts are more than anecdotal: his work was oriented by the parental poles of poetics and engineering, and directed by his keen sense of crafted materials. His 1914 sojourn to Paris was epiphanic—
● he probably saw such Picasso constructions as *Guitar* (1912) —although he was already acquainted with Cubism from the great
▲ Shchukin Collection in Moscow. This is evident from such early paintings as *The Sailor: A Self-Portrait* (1911–12), which shows some quasi-Cubist faceting. Yet his first monumental figures are pushed toward the picture plane in a way more suggestive of archaic Russian pictures than contemporary Cubist ones—not only the folkloric woodprints that were popular in his Cubo-Futurist milieu but also religious icons, whose muted palette of colors, flat application of paint, and sheer materiality appealed to Tatlin. Sculptor and critic Vladimir Markov suggested why as early as 1914: "Let us remember icons; they are embellished with metal halos, metal casings on the shoulders, fringes and incrustations; the painting itself is decorated with precious stones and metals, etc. All of this destroys our contemporary conception of painting." In this modernist rereading of the medieval icon, its very materiality disallows any illusion of the real world and instead conducts "the people to beauty, to religion, to God." In his constructions Tatlin reversed the thrust of this anti-illusionism in order to direct the viewer not to a transcendental realm of God but to an immanent reality of materials. In effect, he
● used the Russian icon as Picasso had used the African mask: as a "witness" to his own analytical development of modernist precedents, as a guide to an art no longer governed by resemblance.

His first known relief, *The Bottle* (1913, now lost), remains a Cubist still life, with different materials used to signify different objects (e.g., glass for bottle). Set within a frame, it is still more pictorial composition than material construction, though his basic repertoire of wood, metal, and glass is in place. In *Selection of Materials: Iron, Stucco, Glass, Asphalt* **[2]**, Tatlin is already on the threshold of Constructivism. The frame remains, but the materials are no longer composed pictorially. An iron triangle projects into space, in contrast with a wooden rod set at an angle in the stucco surface; below and above are two further juxtapositions of curved metal and cut glass. *Selection* has the character of a demonstration: it first lists its materials, then allows intrinsic properties to suggest appropriate forms. "The material dictates the forms, and not the opposite," critic Nikolai Tarabukin wrote in a 1916 definition of Constructivism based on such works. "Wood, metal, glass, etc. impose different constructions." For Tatlin, machined wood was square and planar, and so suggested rectilinear forms; metal could be cut and bent, and so suggested curvilinear forms; glass was somewhere in between, with a transparency that might also mediate between interior and exterior surfaces. How different this materialism is from the ambiguity of Cubist constructions! Far from the "arbitrary," Tatlin sought to make his constructions "necessary" through this "truth to materials," an ur-modernist aesthetic that tended also to be an ethics and, after the Russian Revolution, a politics as well.

Yet this was not merely a positivistic reduction to materials, as would often be the case in postwar versions of the aesthetic. For along with Cubist constructions and Russian icons, a third model was in play here—the contemporaneous language experiments of
■ "transrational" poets such as Aleksei Kruchenikh and Velemir

▲ 1960a ● Introduction 3, 1912

▲ 1910 ● 1903, 1907 ■ Introduction 3, 1915

Khlebnikov, whose play *Zangezi* Tatlin directed and designed in 1923. Khlebnikov not only shattered syntax but also broke language down into phonemes, the basic units of speech. He did ▲so, however, not with a Futurist or Dadaist delight in destruction but in order to reassemble these pieces of sound and script into new "word-constructions" suggestive of new meanings. It was this constructive act that Tatlin affirmed: "Parallel to his word-constructions, I decided to make material constructions."

After 1914 Tatlin adopted the term "counter-relief," as if to signal a dialectical advance in his constructions: just as the first "painterly reliefs" exceeded painting, so the new "counter-reliefs," which extended from the wall, exceeded the painterly reliefs. Sometimes these counter-reliefs were suspended across corners with axial wires and rods **[3]**. These "corner counter-reliefs" were complex constructions of metal planes, squared and curved, perpendicular and angular. Not painting, sculpture, or architecture, they were "counters" to all three arts that activated materials, spaces, and viewers in new ways. First shown in December 1915 •at "0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings" in Petrograd (once St. Petersburg, soon to be Leningrad), where Tatlin vied with Kazimir Malevich for leadership of the Russian avant-garde, the counter-reliefs drew young artists into the experimental ■("laboratory") phase of Constructivism. If the painterly reliefs advanced the Constructivist notion of *faktura*, which, in contradistinction to Western "facture," stressed the mechanical aspect of the painterly mark rather than its subjective side, the counter-reliefs advanced the Constructivist notion of *construction*, which, in opposition to Western "composition," stressed active engagement with art rather than contemplative reflection of it. Yet to be developed was the third notion of Constructivism, *tectonics*, the dialectical connection of Constructivist formal experimentation with Communist principles of socioeconomic organization, but this most difficult step in the Constructivist program had to await the Revolution.

Works of art without the artist

Son of a supportive notary-father, Duchamp had three siblings who were also artists. His two older brothers, Jacques Villon (1875–1963) and Raymond Duchamp-Villon (1876–1918), drew Marcel into the "Puteaux Group" of Cubists around Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger. This circle had begun to turn Cubism into a doctrine by 1912, and Duchamp withdrew over its rejection of his *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2*. Stung by the controversy, Duchamp would never again be its victim; on the contrary, he became a master of the art of provocation—one of his more ambiguous legacies to twentieth-century art. The mysterious move from his Cubist paintings, which are mostly "nudes," "virgins," and "brides" tinctured with personal eroticism, to his readymades, which are mostly banal products distanced from subjectivity, remains a provocation in its own right. We have only a few pieces of this puzzle. In the summer of 1912 Duchamp lived in Munich,

▲ 1909, 1916a, 1920, 1925c ● 1915 ■ 1921b

3 • Vladimir Tatlin, *Corner Counter-Relief*, 1915
Iron, aluminum, primer, dimensions unknown

which he later called "the scene of my complete liberation"—perhaps from the strictly "retinal" concerns of the Parisian avant-garde ("retinal" was his term for painting that did not engage the "gray matter" of the mind). Earlier, in 1911, he had befriended ▲the wealthy Francis Picabia (1879–1953), who had introduced him to the idea of the artist as dandyish "negator," an attitude that Duchamp would later adopt and develop. Also in 1911 he had attended a play by Raymond Roussel (1877–1933) based on his novel *Impressions of Africa* (1910). Extremely eccentric, Roussel made a method out of the arbitrary: he would select a phrase, construct a homophone of it (that is, a phrase similar in sound but not in sense), use one of the phrases to begin the story and the other to end it, and then concoct a narrative to connect the two. Writing here became a dysfunctional kind of machine. "Roussel showed me the way," Duchamp insisted, not only to the homophonic puns and •dysfunctional machines of his "rotoreliefs," but more generally to his various stratagems that combined chance and choice, the arbitrary and the given. These stratagems, such as his mechanical drawings and readymade objects, put conventional notions of art and artist alike into radical doubt; they were "works of art without an artist to make them," he once remarked.

Two further anecdotes are telling in this regard. In 1911 Duchamp painted an "exploded" coffee grinder; in its "diagrammatic aspect," he commented later, "I began to think I could avoid all contact with traditional pictorial painting." Then, in 1912, at the Salon de la locomotion aérienne, he remarked to his friend, the ■sculptor Constantin Brancusi: "Painting is over. Who'd do better than this propeller? Tell me, could you do that?" This was not an endorsement of machine art before the fact—again, the machines that interested Duchamp were dysfunctional figures of frustrated desire (like the ones that populate his *The Bride Stripped Bare by her* ◆*Bachelors, Even*, also known as the *Large Glass*, 1915–23). But the question does point to the queries soon posed in his own work: What is the relation of utilitarian objects to aesthetic objects, of

▲ 1916b, 1919 ● 1918, 1993a ■ 1927b ◆ 1918

The "Peau de l'Ours"

The readymade, perhaps more than other art form, exposes the complicated relationship between art and the market. On the one hand, endowing an object (even, as Duchamp showed, a mass-produced one such as a urinal) with aesthetic value, could inflate its price from lowly work to masterpiece. On the other, the buying and selling of these expensive works has the same structure as the marketing of any other luxury item, thus lowering the object (aesthetically speaking) to the level of any other commodity. Hence the avant-garde found itself trapped within a structural condition in which it was in an endless race with the very capital logic it wished to expose.

That the avant-garde would prove to be an excellent investment was the bet that businessman André Level made in 1904 when, with twelve other speculators, he founded the "Peau de l'Ours" [Skin of the Bear], a consortium to buy avant-garde works, hold them for ten years, and then sell them off at auction. By 1907, Level's group had already been buying Matisse and Picasso heavily, and in that year it acquired Picasso's *Family of Saltimbanques* directly from the artist for 1,000 francs (expending the whole of its budget for the year). When it came to the time for the sale, held at the Hôtel Drouot in Paris on March 2, 1914, their collection of 145 items, consisting primarily of Fauvist and Cubist works, went under the hammer. Level advertised the event heavily, drawing large crowds to the presale exhibition and the auction itself, making it a kind of verdict on avant-garde art. In the event, the *Family of Saltimbanques*—the success of the evening—was sold for 12,650 francs, while the whole collection had increased its price fourfold, the initial investment of 27,500 francs now returning an impressive total of 116,545 francs.

commodities to art? Can a picture be made as anonymous, as non-subjective, as "perfect" as a propeller? From this point on he did prefer objects that were given, not made, and images that were scripted, not invented (not "retinal" at all), such as his two *Chocolate Grinders* diagrammed in projection in 1913 and 1914. Sly allusions to sex and scatology, these grinders of colored substances also parodied painting, reduced it to the status of an industrial diagram—which, as art historian Molly Nesbit has shown, informed the teaching of drawing in French schools when Duchamp was a child.

He chose it

Duchamp used chance to decenter authorship, but his quintessential device in this respect was the readymade, an appropriated product positioned as art. This device allowed him to leap past old aesthetic questions of craft, medium, and taste ("is it good or bad painting or sculpture?") to new questions that were potentially ontological ("what is art?"), epistemological ("how do we know it?"), and institutional ("who determines it?"). Two of his notes are especially important here. The first, written in 1913, is a programmatic question: "Can one make works that are not 'works' of art?" The second, from 1914, is an obscure fragment: "A kind of pictorial Nominalism." Both notes suggest that Duchamp had begun to construe *naming* art—that is, nominating a given image or object as art—as tantamount to *making* art. Although the term was not yet in place, the first "readymade" was a bicycle wheel set upside down on a stool **[4]**. He would find the name for his new technique, precisely readymade, only when he moved to New York in 1915 for the war, as a label for clothing bought off the rack, potentially mass produced and consumed. How are we to read this wheel? As "art" at all? Indeed, as a "work" at all (for it involved almost no labor of his own)? Or is this wheel that spins freely nothing but work, nothing but function? *Bottlerack* (1914) pushed the question of use further. Although it might suggest an abstract sculpture, this bottle-dryer remains both a utilitarian object and a simple commodity, and so compels us to consider the complex relationships between aesthetic ▲ value, use-value, and exchange-value.

4 • Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913 (1964 replica, original lost)
Readymade: bicycle wheel fixed to a stool, height 126 (49⅝)

▲ 1986

The most notorious readymade was a urinal named *Fountain* **[5]**, which compounded the provocative questions of the other readymades with a scandalous evocation of the bathroom. Duchamp chose the urinal from a New York showroom of J. L. Mott Iron Works, a manufacturer of such fixtures, rotated it ninety degrees, signed it R. Mutt ("R" for Richard, slang for a rich man, and "Mutt" to refer both to Mott and to Mutt, a popular cartoon character of the time), set it on a pedestal, and submitted it to the American Society of Independent Artists for its first exhibition in April 1917. Duchamp was the chair of the hanging committee, but the show was unjuried, that is, it accepted all 2,125 works by 1,235 artists that were offered … except for *Fountain* by the unknown R. Mutt. It was rejected on grounds that Duchamp rebutted, through his proxy Beatrice Wood, in a defense titled "The Richard Mutt Case," published in the May issue of their short-lived magazine *The Blind Man*. It reads in full:

> *They say any artist paying six dollars may exhibit.*
> *Mr Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion this article disappeared and never was exhibited.*
> *What were the grounds for refusing Mr Mutt's fountain:-*
> *1 Some contended it was immoral, vulgar.*
> *2 Others, it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing.*
> *Now Mr Mutt's fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bathtub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see every day in plumbers' show windows.*
> *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.*
> *As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges.*

The principal questions here—of immorality and utility, of originality and intentionality—are contested in art to this day. So, too, are the related problems of "choice," that is, of art as a process of nomination by the authority of the artist. Were the readymades art because Duchamp declared them to be, or were they "based on a reaction of visual indifference, a total absence of good or bad taste, a complete anaesthesia," as he argued much later, and so a challenge to such authority? Never shown in its initial guise, *Fountain* was suspended in time, its questions deferred to later moments. In this way it became one of the most influential objects in twentieth-century art well after the fact.

In the dominant tradition of bourgeois aesthetics from the Enlightenment to the present, art cannot be utilitarian because its value depends on its autonomy, on its "purposiveness without ▲purpose" (in the famous phrase of the philosopher Immanuel Kant), precisely on its uselessness. In this tradition, to use art is almost nihilistic—a point that Duchamp dramatized in another note from 1913 where he proposed to "use a Rembrandt as an

5 • Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917 (1964 replica)
Readymade: porcelain, 36 × 48 × 61 (14⅛ × 18⅞ × 24)

ironing-board." In this regard the readymade may be only a gesture of bourgeois radicality; as the German critic Theodor Adorno once remarked (as though he had the Rembrandt ironing-board in mind): "It would border on anarchism to revoke the reification of a great work of art in the spirit of immediate use-values." This is the great difference between the critiques of the institution of art advanced by Duchamp and Tatlin, which is also to say, the great difference between the contexts in which they worked. In bourgeois Paris and New York, Duchamp could only attack the institution of autonomous art, sometimes dandyishly, sometimes nihilistically, while in revolutionary Russia, Tatlin could hope, at least for a time, to see this institution transformed. Like the dandy Charles Baudelaire and the engaged Gustave Courbet in mid-nineteenth-century France, Duchamp and Tatlin posed two complementary models of the artist: the ambivalent consumer who seeks to rename art within a horizon of a commodity culture versus the active producer who seeks to reposition art vis-à-vis industrial production within a horizon of Communist revolution. What others would make of these possibilities, within their own historical limits, is a most important story in twentieth-century art. HF

FURTHER READING

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▲ Introduction 2