

# The Symbolic Restoration of Human Labor: Duchamp's Readymades\*

Kyeong-Kyu Im

## I

“There is no single Marcel Duchamp but many” –David Joselit characterizes the dynamics and complexity of Duchamp’s art with this simple declaration in his book, *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp 1910-1941* (3). Tracking down Duchamp’s artistic career and the art historical canon, he finds an invented series of Duchamp: “Duchamp as alchemist, Duchamp as mathematician, Duchamp as critic of the institutions of art, and Duchamp as destabilizer of gender roles” (3). These names characteristically epitomize Duchamp’s legacy and his precise influence on major areas of art since before the First World War. What is problematic in these names, however, is that they are unable to illuminate the political aspect of Duchamp’s art in relations with the dominant social structure such as capitalism.<sup>1)</sup>

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1) Here, my argument may be a bit problematic because the critics’ responses to Duchamp’s challenge both to the traditional concept of art and to the gender division can be seen as

Indeed, despite the fact that the Dada movement was resistant to the bourgeois culture and capitalism, our discussion of Duchamp has been relatively limited to the aesthetic issues such as how Duchamp's experimental artworks are different from the traditional ones, and how they function as an artwork, only to fail to move beyond formalism and to restore the political significance of his works in a broader socio-historical sense which has been repressed under the enigmatic surface. In this paper, therefore, I will approach Duchamp's art, particularly, readymades, from a Marxist perspective and explicate its political potential.

It is not that no effort has been made to read Duchamp politically. In his influential work, *Theory of Avant-Garde*, for instance, Peter Bürger attempts to give a historical explanation to the Avant-garde movement by historicizing art as a social institution, and interprets it as a self-negation of art as an institution. According to Bürger, there was a notion of autonomy of art—symbolized by the aestheticism in the nineteenth century—which radically detached art from the praxis of life and, as a result, art became an ahistorical and apolitical object that had no actual impact on society. The crux of the Avant-garde movement, therefore, Bürger argues, lies in their protest whose aim is “to reintegrate art into the praxis of life” (22). While Bürger's account seems to well illuminate how the Avant-garde movement restores the social function of art within the art-historical context, however, his theory stops short of explaining the politico-historical specificity of the Avant-garde art, only to make it a self-referential object. In other words, his theory lacks historical particularities. As a consequence, rather than historicizing the Avant-garde art, Bürger paradoxically produces a purely ahistorical and abstract theory. It is precisely because Bürger views Avant-garde art through the binary opposition of art and anti-art. By doing so, he precludes the possibility that it can be recognized and circulated as a work of art that not only has semantic richness, but also performs a positive socio-political function by addressing specific questions of its time. As

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a political reading in a broader sense. But I want limit the conception of “the political” only to “class” problem, which was, in fact, the central political issue in the early twentieth century.

for Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), for instance, Bürger interprets it as a mere "arbitrarily chosen mass-product," which, as a "manifestation" of the avant-garde's self-criticism of art, is only meant to mock the bourgeois artistic practice and negate the Romantic conception of art as a product of individual genius (52).<sup>2)</sup> However, the problem is that the readymades ceaselessly entice the spectator to read them as a work of art that has its own internal dynamics. Furthermore, the playful title Duchamp strategically inscribed on the objects seduce us into a linguistic problem such as pun that needs interpretation.



*Fountain* 1917

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2) Here, Bürger's interpretation of Duchamp's *Fountain* clearly echoes the anxiety that the hanging committee of the Society of Independent Artist—founded in New York with the purpose of holding exhibition for any artists who cared to exhibit something—had when they first faced this work, which means that he still plays within the very notion of art Duchamp tries to upend. In 1916, Duchamp was made an executive member of the Society. Under the invented pseudonym "Richard Mutt," Duchamp submitted a urinal to the society's exhibition with a title *Fountain* and with a crude sign "R. Mutt, 1917." The hanging committee, however, chose to reject it and to violate its own first principle and the spirit of the Society, for fear that they should be ridiculed and the legitimacy of their enterprise would be obviously undermined by accepting the urinal which was clearly not a work of art and had nothing to with an art exhibition. After this occasion, Duchamp immediately left the Society. For detailed explanation on this occasion, see Dawn Ades *et al.* *Marcel Duchamp* (1999).

In approaching Duchamp's readymades, therefore, we have to abandon the rigid binary opposition of art/anti-art which is likely to confine our discussion into the limited boundary of the question what art is. In order to do so, we need to see them as a newly emergent art form which not only is distinguished from other Avant-garde artistic practices as well as traditional art, but also attempts to positively respond to the social contradiction of capitalism by actively utilizing typical products of capitalism, that is, mass-produced commodities, as new artistic materials. Of course, Duchamp is neither the only nor the first in using mass-produced objects in art. Nevertheless, his readymades occupy a very unique status in art history. Kurt Schwitters, for example, also utilizes such commodity-objects as tram-tickets, envelopes, and cheese wrappers, which brings about an important change in the mode of signification of painting. However, Schwitters's objects by and large remain subordinate elements in his art. Those materials are under control of the very syntax of the traditional painting so that they become a kind of substitutions for oil-colors. In contrast, Duchamp's commodity-objects replace the whole syntax of art with their own internal logics. While for Schwitters the commodity-objects are nothing but supplementary ingredients of painting, for Duchamp they in themselves become works of art. In this sense, Duchamp's readymade is a very unique artistic form of capitalism: it is able not only to most effectively reflect the fundamental contradictions of capitalism, that is, commodification, but also to find a utopian moment in it.

In this respect, I would read Duchamp's readymade as what Fredric Jameson calls "a socially symbolic act" that aims at resolving an actual social contradiction in an imaginary level (Jameson 77).<sup>3)</sup> To read Duchamp in this way does not

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3) To elaborate the notion of art or narrative as a socially symbolic act, Jameson uses Levi-Strauss' analysis of Caduveo Indians' unique facial decoration. According to Levi-Strauss: "the use of a design which is symmetrical but yet lies across an oblique axis ... a complicated situation based upon two contradictory forms of duality, and resulting in a compromise brought about by a secondary opposition between the ideal axis of the object itself [the human face] and the ideal axis of the figure which it represents" (Levi-Strauss 176, qtd. Jameson 78). And this mysterious tension between the real face and the oblique

necessarily mean giving up a formalist interpretation of the readymade. Rather, the starting point would be an explication of its formal and structural peculiarities. Yet it would be an explication already oriented toward transcending the purely formalistic reading. Accordingly, it is a movement which is achieved not by abandoning the formal level for social dimension extrinsic to it, but, rather, by constructing the formal patterns of the readymade as a symbolic enactment of the social and political instance within the aesthetic. As implied in Jameson's use of Levi-Strauss's analysis, such a symbolic function of the readymade can be found only when we grasp the readymade as something determinately structured by a kind of internal contradiction rather than as an organic whole, and rewrite this formal contradiction in terms of the "historical and ideological subtext" inscribed in it (81).<sup>4</sup> In fact, instead of hiding it under the refined surface, the readymade aggressively displays its internal tension—the tension between commodity and art, between the words inscribed on the object and the object itself. The aesthetic effect of the readymade also lies in this forced unification of art and commodity. Our task here is then to clarify the historical subtext that such an internal tension ultimately refers to, and to restore it on the surface of the text. Then, the first epistemological question Bürger posed on the readymade—"What is art?"—should be reformulated into more functional and dialectical ones such as "What kind of ideological and historical reality does Duchamp's readymade refer to?" and "In what way does the readymade respond to it?"

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facial patterns that represents the face works in a way that gives a symbolic expression to the actual contradiction between class that originates in the rigid caste system, and thereby provides an imaginary solution to the unresolvable social contradiction.

- 4) Here, what Jameson calls "subtext" is "not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals" (Jameson 81). It is rather close to Lacan's notion of "the Real," which entirely resists symbolization yet our access to it must be by way of symbolization.

## II

What kind of ideological and historical reality does Duchamp's readymade refer to? As explicitly revealed in the readymade's internal tension between art and commodity, the answer is no doubt capitalism and its predominant commodification. What matters here, however, is not the emergence of commodity form itself because commodity has already existed—although in a primitive form—even before capitalism, but its structural consequences that are able to influence our inner and outer life in the capitalist society. Generally, commodification refers to the transformation of use-value of a product of labor into abstract exchange-value, and this process is characteristically epitomized in Marx's insight into modernity: "All that is solid melts into the air" ("Manifesto" 476). As soon as a product of labor arrives at the marketplace, the material concreteness of the product evaporates into the air, and is replaced with exchange-value—a sign that represents the total quantity of labor spent in producing it. As exchange-value takes the place of use-value, the commodity achieves some sort of phantom objectivity, or what Marx calls "fetishism" of the commodity (*Capital* 165). Such a "mysterious character of the commodity-form," according to Marx, lies in:

the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social. ... It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. (164-5)

The significance of this passage is that individuals' own productive activity becomes something objective and independent of them, something that controls

them by virtue of an autonomy alien to them. That is to say, the commodification brings about an important change in the subjective world, i.e., alienation. Labor becomes estranged from laborers. It turns into a commodity which must go its own way independently of human beings just like other consumer articles. The result is that social relationship between men is replaced by relationships between commodities to the degree that human beings are alienated not only from their own labor but also from the products of their labor. Later, Georg Lukacs redefines this process as “reification” – “the progressive elimination of the qualitative, human and individual attributes of the workers” through so-called rational or scientific calculation – parodying Max Weber’s definition of modernization as rationalization (88).

The historical subtext inscribed in Duchamp’s readymades, therefore, is not merely commodification itself, but repression of the real and alienation of human beings and their productive activity. By choosing mass-produced commodities that embody such fundamental contradictions of the modern capitalism as his artistic medium and endowing them with artistic value, i.e., transforming the quantifiable objects to the unquantifiable works of art, Duchamp symbolically undoes the reification and restores the qualitative element of the human labor that have been estranged from commodities.

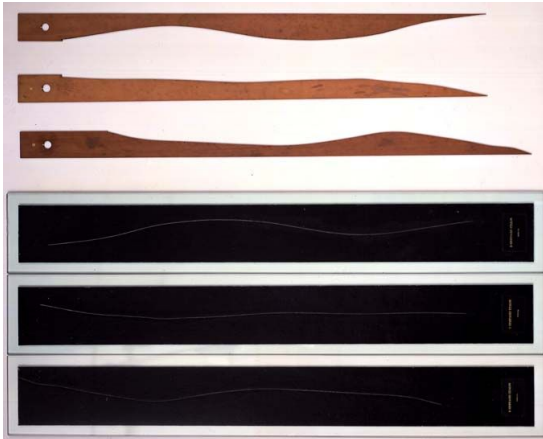
Here, my argument directly counters David Joselit’s interpretation of the problematic relationship between Duchamp’s readymades and reification. In *Infinite Regress*, Joselit approaches the problem of reification in Duchamp’s art in relation to Picasso’s cubism. First of all, he reinterprets the autonomy of commodity and fetishism in terms of Saussure’s semiotics, and complicates the understanding of “exchange value” so as to include not only the economic but also the linguistic and the sexual (34ff). Joselit views Duchamp’s early paintings as an alternative form of cubist aesthetic that is widely recognized as dissolution of the body into a linguistic economy of sign, or the total eclipse of the body by language, paralleling the reification process of commodity exchange. He then characterizes Duchamp’s readymades as transposition of the cubist dialectics into “an opposition between

commodities and the linguistic inscriptions that ... elevate manufactured objects to the status of art" (6).

According to Joselit, however, Duchamp does not simply endorse the cubist logic. He rather pushes it up to the dead end in which the immeasurable body becomes a thing to-be-measured and, at the same time, a standard measurement. This moment is what Joselit calls "infinite regress"—a situation in which subjectivity and desire are totally removed from the material body of the commodity and even language inscribed on the object becomes a pure material object. Differences between body and language, use-value and exchange-value, the carnal and the semiotic collapse, leaving behind an endless chain of equivalent objects. Such a regression dramatizes "the power of capitalism not simply to reify but also to dissolve, or deterritorialize, both objective form and subjective identity" (Joselit 6).

Joselit's very sophisticated discussion renders Duchamp's readymade an allegory of reification in which the triumphant progress of commodity transforms both subjective and objective world into a homogeneous space. As a consequence, readymades become a passive mirror that merely reflects the material base as it is, stripped of its critical potential to shape a positive intervention into the social formation. In order to avoid such critical dead end, above all, we need to view Duchamp's art not as a prolongation of cubist aesthetics, but as a parody of it, which is intended to make fun of rationalization and expose the impossibility of the replacement of the carnal with the semiotic, the qualitative with the quantitative.





3 *Standard Stoppages* 1913

In fact, Duchamp's attitude toward reification and rationalization is well expressed in his treatment of science in his art. Even though he actively combines art with mathematics or physics, Duchamp does not celebrate science itself. Rather than using science for rationalizing artistic objects, he appropriates it no more than as a device to transcend the immediacy in the perception of retinal art by conceptualizing visual objects with mechanic figures and scientific formulas. Thus he argues in an interview:

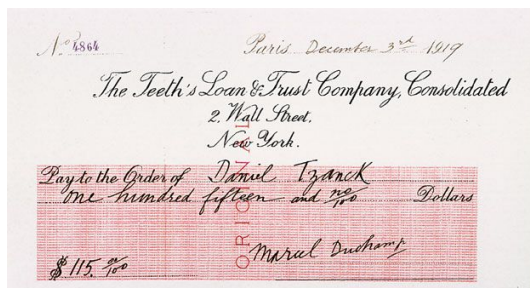
I was interested in introducing the precise and exact aspect of science, which hadn't often been done, or at least hadn't been talked about very much. It wasn't for love of science that I did this; on the contrary, it was rather in order to discredit it, mildly, lightly, unimportantly. (DMD 39)

Duchamp mocks the human pretension of measuring nature since it is a ludicrous attempt to calibrate nature with a scheme that is always arbitrary. The 3 *Standard Stoppages* of 1913-14 characteristically reveals his disbelief in scientific calculation and rationalization. In his notes, he describes the idea of the fabrication of the work: "If a straight horizontal thread one meter long falls from a height of

one meter onto a horizontal plane distorting itself *as it pleases* and creates a new shape of the measure of length” (WMD 22, italics in original). Duchamp takes three one-meter-long strings and drops them from a height of a meter on to a canvas. Then he fixes the thread and calls them a new standard of measurement that is created by chance, gravity, and whims of threads. By doing so, he dismantles the normalized metric system. The notion of making three standard units, not one, also underscores the arbitrary nature of measurement and the absurdity of artificial rationalization. In this way, scientific rationalization is reduced to a mere whim or chance operation.

### III

Duchamp’s implicit critique of reification and rationalization takes a much more dramatic form in his readymades. Especially in the *Tzanck Check* of 1919, Duchamp uses “money,” a universal measurement of exchange-value, as an artistic material, in order to upend the system of commodity-exchange. In this work, as implied in his specification for the readymade as “*a kind of rendezvous*,” the situation in which this work was produced is essential in determining the meaning of the work (WMD 32 italics in original). Duchamp went to a dentist but was unable to pay for the treatment he had received. Fortunately, the dentist Daniel Tzanck was also a collector of modern art. Duchamp set about producing a phony check—stamped “ORIGINAL” in the middle and issued from “The Teeth’s Loan & Trust Company, Consolidated,” of “2 Wall Street, New York.” Duchamp summarizes this situation: “I asked him how much I owed, and then did the check entirely by hand. I took a long time doing the little letters, to do something which would look printed—it wasn’t a small check” (DMD 63). Here, the exchange of the phony check between Duchamp and Tzanck can be read in two different perspectives: as an act of exchange of gift, not commodity, and as an act of mimicking the ordinary economic activity in the marketplace.



Tzanck Check 1919

First, Peter Read finds a phonetic game going on in the phrase, “The Teeth’s Loan and Trust Company.” In French, according to him, “teeth” translates as dents, which may in turn suggest “dons, meaning ‘gifts,’ and so this becomes the only bank making gift as well as loans, ‘The Gifts Loan and Trust Company’” (100, italics in original). The pun between dents and dons suggests that the transaction between Duchamp and Tzanck mediated by teeth and a phony check may be an exchange of gifts, not of commodities. Such an exchange of gifts between men is usually grounded on mutual trust within a community. Therefore, it can be an alternative form of exchange to the logic of production, utility, and instrumental rationality, and individualism governing capitalist society, since the check is fake money that has no value, if not an artistic one, unable to initiate another exchange.

Likewise, Tzanck’s service is also a gift because his labor cannot be connected to the accumulation of the capital. Accordingly, their exchange ironically marks the death of exchange and the death of production. Jean Baudrillard calls such a form of transaction “symbolic exchange,” a pre-capitalist mode of exchange: objects are exchanged in rituals that value waste and expenditure and are indifferent to human needs and social rationality. According to Baudrillard, unlike the capitalist semiotic exchange grounded on particular value system, symbolic exchange stands for a variety of heterogeneous activities, including “the exchange of looks, the present which comes and goes, prodigality, festival—and also destruction (which returns to

non-value what production has erected, valorized)” (207). He implies that by engaging in symbolic exchange which is caught up neither in use values nor exchange values, one escapes domination by the logic of political economy, and is able to subvert the logic of capitalist system which demands that all activity have specific uses, values, and purposes. Viewed in this way, Duchamp’s *Tzanck Check* provides an implicit way of challenging and undoing the reification by replacing commodity exchange with symbolic one.

On the other hand, the *Tzanck Check* dramatizes the graceful metamorphosis of human labor from a commodity into a work of art. The exchange between Duchamp and Tzanck seems to follow the ordinary routine of daily economic transactions between a dentist and a patient. Duchamp pays a certain amount of money for the medical treatment and Tzanck receives the check as a rational reward for his service. That is to say, the exchange of phony check is an imitation of capitalist mode of exchange. Such imitation is an ambivalent discursive practice that oscillates “between mimicry and mockery,” as Homi Bhabha argues in a colonial context (86). At the very moment that the phony check plays the role of money, its mimicking becomes an act of mocking that is meant to dismantle the whole system of circulation. As soon as the check is circulated like a real check as a medium of commodity exchange, it ceases being a check because it is a fake. It spells a stormy halt to the natural flow and valorization of the capital, eventually hindering Tzanck’s labor from being properly translated into an ordinary economic activity. The actual payment for his labor—the quantification of human labor—is perpetually postponed.

Such an eternal delay of payment, however, is rewarded in a symbolic way. Here, Dalia Judovitz’s insightful explication of pun in this work is very helpful. According to Judovitz, Duchamp uses the word “teeth” in another context to describe combs: “Classify combs by the number of their teeth” (WMD 71). Thus, the bank’s name “The Teeth’s ...” of *Tzanck Check* can be seen as an allusion to Comb (or Peigne, a pun on painting in French), and, therefore, to painting (171). Then, the name of the bank which is supposed to pay to Tzanck is actually “The

Painting's Loan and Trust Company, Consolidated," which implies that Duchamp's debt to Tzanck would be consolidated with a work of art.

Duchamp's act of drawing a check, therefore, is in fact an act of drawing a painting. Similarly, his act of inscribing the amount of money on the check paradoxically becomes an act not only of unwriting the exchange-value assigned on human labor, but also inscribing human labor's unquantifiable value on the check. The concrete number, \$ 115.00, ironically marks the impossibility of quantifying human labor. As a result, the material body of the check turns into a reservoir which the productive force of human labor flows into and is preserved without being reified. In this way, the *Tzanck Check* restores human labor on the textual surface instead of obscuring it with its own nominal value, \$ 115.00.

#### IV

In addition to undoing reification, the *Tzanck Check* betrays an important aspect of Duchamp's readymades, that is, collective dimension of art. In this work, Tzanck emerges, not just as a collector or a patron of art, but as an active participant in art-making. By providing his labor as an artistic material and accepting the fake check, he is able to insert his own subjectivity into the work of art to a degree that he might claim co-authorship of the work. Duchamp indeed seems to strategically entice Tzanck's participation in making the check. By doing so, he can implicitly reveal the collective dimension of art while demystifying the prevailing myth of individual genius. Duchamp's emphasis on the collectivity of art is well expressed in his conception of artist as a craftsman:

I don't believe in the creative function of the artist. He's a man like any other. It's his job to do certain things, but the businessman does certain things also, you understand? On the other hand the word "art" interests me very much. If it comes from the Sanskrit, as I've heard, it signifies "making." Now everyone

makes something, and those who make things on a canvas, with a frame, they're called artists. Formerly, they were called craftsmen, a term I prefer. We're all craftsmen, in civilian or military life. When Rubens, or someone else, needed blue, he had to ask his guild for so many grams, and they discussed the question, to find out if he could have fifty or sixty grams, or more. (DMD 16)

By reconceptualizing the notion of the artist as a craftsman or a maker, Duchamp abolishes the hierarchy between artist and non-artist, while accentuating the necessity of cooperation between artists. For him, art is not a product of an individual genius; it is a product of collective cooperation. He can foreground such a collective dimension of art by deliberately choosing mass-produced commodities as artistic materials and rendering them works of art. By doing so, he makes it possible for the anonymous masses—those who have produced the commodities yet been alienated from their products—to ultimately reappear as artists or makers. As a consequence, the pervasive alienation in the capitalist era is symbolically compensated to a degree that masses are elevated into the subject of production of art, and of history.

The *Fountain* of 1916, an inverted urinal that Duchamp submitted to the Society of Independence Artists under the pseudonym, Richard Mutt, thematizes such a return of the alienated masses in a far more complicated and more utopian way. In this work, Duchamp's ubiquitous pun plays a key role. Duchamp purchased the urinal from J. L. Mott, the owner of Philadelphia Iron Works, and crudely signed on it "R. Mutt, 1917," a variation of J. L. Mott. Here, as many critics point out, "R. Mutt" is a site of Duchamp's playful linguistic game. Thierry De Duve explains this game as this:

At the beginning of the story Marcel Duchamp is R. Mutt, but this we won't know until the end. R. Mutt is like the little nobody who proclaims himself an artist in taking out his membership in the Society; he divides himself into a stockholder and an artisan, Richard and Mutt. Richard is like Arensberg, both of them "big" stockholders in the Society (both founding members) and both collectors (Richard is president of the hanging committee and future founder of

the Société Anonyme). Mutt is like Mott, artisan-painter or small industrialist. As artisan Mutt suffers from his person's being divided into an exploited worker and a merchant who pockets surplus value. As industrialist Mott doesn't suffer, he exploits his workers. Mutt envies Mott and fears for his trade. ("Marcel Duchamp" 68-9)

Through phonetic association, Duchamp's identity is multiplied: from an alleged artist R. Mutt, to a stockholder Richard, to an artisan Mutt, and, finally, to small industrialist-merchant Mott. In this multiplication of identity, Duchamp's subjectivity shifts from one position to another, ranging from a financier to a manual worker. Among these multiplied subjectivities, however, there is no center and no periphery. Duchamp has no central and fixed identity; he is destined to be forever decentered in the realm of intersubjectivity. In this sense, the *Fountain* is what Mikhail Bakhtin would call a polyphonic object: Duchamp as an author of the work, having no authority over the voices he creates, is democratically positioned "alongside" the forged identities (Bakhtin 6). The liberation of the voices from authorial control results in an endless dialogue between classes, between Mutt and Richard, between Mutt and Mott. There is no last word which can be spoken, no absolute or single authority, but on-going confrontation and contradiction.

Nevertheless, a special kind of unity among them can be achieved, consisting of "a dialogic concordance of unmerged twos and multiples" (Morson and Emerson 289), which Bakhtin describes as "unity of event" (21). This new unity can be located in the dynamic process of the on-going dialogue between classes which is actually happening outside the text. Consequently it may, in a symbolic way, dealienate social relationships between men and restore totality that has been fragmented by the omnipresent reifying force of capitalism. Such a symbolic unity without hierarchy among the various voices participating in making art constitutes the utopian moment in Duchamp's readymades.

(Chosun University)

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**Abstract****The Symbolic Restoration of Human Labor  
in Duchamp's Readymades**

Kyeong-Kyu Im

Marcel Duchamp and his art have been discussed within the framework of art versus anti-art. What is problematic in this framework is that it is unable to illuminate the political aspect of Duchamp's art in conjunction with the dominant social structure such as capitalism. This study, therefore, approaches Duchamp's art, particularly, readymades, from a Marxist perspective and explicates its political potential. Here I would suggest that Duchamp's readymades directly address the central contradictions of emerging bourgeois capitalism, that is, reification and consequent alienation of human labor. My conclusion is that Duchamp's readymades provide a site in which human labor is restored in a symbolic way.

■ **Key words** : Marcel Duchamp, readymades, reification, alienation, human labor

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