

# An analysis of the meaning of the existence of Duchamp's "Fountain" artwork

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**Abstract:** The regulation and boundaries of works of art have always been an important issue in Western aesthetic research. Heidegger, through the regulation of the physical properties of ordinary things, pondered and cross-examined the stipulation of works of art [1]. "The existence of works" is a multi-faceted and complex theme, which is related to the materiality, meaning, and concept of the work, as well as its place in history and society. Marcel Duchamp's Fountain is a controversial masterpiece in the history of 20th-century art, and it also provides a new opportunity for the survival mode of artistic creation. This paper takes "Fountain" as the research object, and explores its material form, conceptual form, social form and its role on the audience.

**Key words:** existence of the work; Duchamp's Fountain; materiality; conceptuality

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## 1 Introduction

In 1917, at the American Independent Art Exhibition, Duchamp sent a ceramic urinal signed R. Mutt to the New York Independent Artists Association exhibition for an anonymous exhibition, and named it "Fountain". However, it sparked outrage and accusations of "blasphemy against art" [2]. Duchamp's "Fountain" is a piece of work that aims to challenge people's traditional notions of art. It is an everyday object that Duchamp has given a new title, thus prompting people to view it from a new perspective. This practice makes the original practical meaning of the urinal lost, but it acquires new content and creates a new form of ready-made art. Duchamp's act shows his mockery of traditional art forms, while also showing a new way of artistic creation. Through this work, he expresses his views on the dissolution of the boundary between art and life, and his questioning of the notion that "art must be beautiful". The urinal challenged the notions and aesthetic standards of traditional art, and the existence of The Fountain sparked controversy not only in the art world, but also in a broad discussion about the nature and meaning of contemporary art. It breaks through the traditional forms and materials of traditional works of art, and makes the audience re-examine the definition of art. Duchamp's Fountain has not only become a work of art, but also a social phenomenon, which has profoundly influenced the cultural concepts of the time and shaped the understanding and interpretation of art in later generations. It demonstrates that beauty is not a necessary condition for art's existence; rather, art can be freed from the shackles of beauty and further developed. In the history of 20th-century art at the time, "Fountain" was a controversial work, which was not only shocking, but also sparked an important discussion about the "way of being" of the work of art.

## 2 The materiality of the work

Duchamp's Fountain is considered a milestone in modern art, but from a material point of view, it is just an ordinary

earthenware toilet. Submitted for exhibition under the name "R. Mutt" (Duchamp's pseudonym), Fountain places an ordinary small object in the center of the gallery. This provokes the viewer to question the nature of the artwork, thus re-examining the concept of the work of art. Duchamp's Fountain is a work that is distinguished by its concise and straightforward form. Although it may seem ordinary visually, its material presence is a radical challenge to the traditional art world. As an installation art, its material form is limited to an ordinary ceramic toilet. However, it is precisely this mundane materiality that makes "Fountain" a thought-provoking work of art.

In the early 20th century, urinals were not uncommon and were one of the most common fixtures in people's daily lives. Duchamp's choice of such ordinary objects is also to break through the limitations of materials in traditional art. In the past, works of art were made of precious materials such as marble, gold or copper. However, the advent of "Fountain" broke this tradition, making the production materials of the works of art no longer the only basis for judging the value and connotation of the works. Outwardly, "Fountain" is no different from your average urinal, but it is the prosaic appearance that makes the work more challenging and satirical. As Heidegger quotes Dürer, "It is true that art exists in nature, and therefore whoever can take it out of it owns it". Duchamp put an ordinary thing in the art museum, hoping to prompt the viewer to see the ordinary thing again, and to think about the connection between art and life. Its external characteristics are not only a concrete expression, but also a challenge and subversion of traditional aesthetic concepts. Due to the loss of the original "Fountain", several surviving works are later facsimiles. This uncertain state of preservation gives the work more meaning and room for interpretation. On the one hand, this phenomenon calls into question the authenticity and identity of the work, and at the same time, it also deepens the discussion of its mode of existence. At the same time, this state of preservation also reflects the fluidity and variability of the existence of artworks, suggesting that we should not only limit the survival of works to their material forms, but also pay more attention to the connotations and concepts contained in them.

"Fountain" is a kind of installation art, and its material existence is not only manifested in the production materials, forms of expression, and state of preservation, but also reflects its questioning and redefinition of traditional artistic concepts. Duchamp uses the most ordinary object and places it in the context of an art museum to break through the boundary between life and art, allowing the viewer to think and think about what real art is. Therefore, the existence of "matter" in the work is not only a depiction of matter and form, but also a discussion and interpretation of its essence and meaning.

### **3 The conceptual existence of the work**

The conceptual existence of The Fountain is far more challenging than its physical form. Duchamp challenged traditional aesthetics and notions by selecting the most ordinary objects of everyday life and placing them in the setting of an art gallery. He tries to break down the boundaries between art and life, and advocates a more open and free artistic practice. The existence of "Fountain" is not only as an object, but also as a concept, a redefinition and challenge of the concept of art.

A deep reflection on the "material existence" in Duchamp's "Fountain" allows us to delve deeper into his choice of urinal as a material that is both common and ordinary. This choice is not only a subversion of traditional art materials, but also a redefinition of artistic concepts. The urinal is a common object of life, but Duchamp ironically stripped this everyday object from its original function and gave it a new aesthetic and cultural value. This choice of material is not only a challenge to the precious materials used by previous artists, but also a question about the aesthetic concept of the viewer. Duchamp's attempt to break through the traditional aesthetics with the common things of life makes us realize that a work of art is not limited to inherent materials, it can be used in every corner of life. Therefore, the urinal selected in "Fountain"

is not only a material form, but also reflects the artist's deep thinking about aesthetics and values, so that the viewer has a new understanding of the essence of art, and explores and thinks about what art is.

The physical characteristics of the work further emphasize the presence of its materiality. The ordinary urinal was in Duchamp's hands unaltered, and the artist chose to keep it in its original form, without embellishment. This minimalist approach reiterates Duchamp's challenge to traditional art, not through technical complexity or external embellishments to highlight the artistry of his work, but through the selection and placement of this everyday object, as well as its different contexts, allowing the viewer to find the extraordinary in the ordinary [3]. Finally, the state of preservation of the work is also worth pondering. Since the original has been lost, most of what the viewer sees are copies. This state of preservation makes the existence of the work more illusory and uncertain, challenging the traditional pursuit of the original artwork. Duchamp seems to deliberately deconstruct the materiality of the work and its mode of existence, emphasizing the conceptual nature of the work. This state of preservation provides the viewer with a new way to interact with the work, transcending its material limitations and entering a more abstract and speculative realm.

The materiality of Fountain is not only a choice of materials and forms, but also a profound reflection on traditional artistic concepts and aesthetic values. Through ordinary objects, minimalist appearances, and precarious state of preservation, Duchamp presents a new way of artistic expression, leading the viewer to go beyond the material form and think about the deeper meaning behind art.

#### **4 The social existence of the work**

At the beginning of Duchamp's Fountain, the general reaction was not to accept it as a work of art. However, after the baptism of time, it is now in the collection of art museums, and it has become a real work of art, and it is widely discussed by art critics [4]. It challenges the traditional concept of art and questions the authority and aesthetic value of art. This is not only a guide to contemporary art, but also an encouragement, inspiring artists to be more free and innovative in art, and at the same time, it has also caused dissatisfaction and rebellion against the art world. The work elevates art to the level of a social problem, thus promoting the interaction and exchange between art and society, politics and culture. Duchamp's Fountain is a reflection of his social consciousness, and although it was strongly debated and criticized at the time, its impact went far beyond the art world of his time. "Fountain" is a major challenge to the definition and aesthetic norms of traditional art, and it is also a milestone event in the history of contemporary art in the 20th century.

"Fountain" is based on the theme of urinal common in daily life, which causes us to challenge the problem of "the existence of works" in traditional art creation. Duchamp's choice to place an ordinary urinal in a gallery and claim it to be a work of art subverts traditional art and undermines the rules and value system of the art market. In his work, he challenges authority to defy traditional power in order to show the freedom and independence of the individual. "Fountain" is not only a work of art, but also a social phenomenon, whose influence transcends the field of art and profoundly affects the social atmosphere and cultural concepts of the time. Challenging tradition and protesting against authority have made the work an important milestone in the history of modern art. As one of the representatives of the Dadaist movement, "Fountain" is not only a work of art, but also a challenge and protest against the social values of the time. It calls on people to break the traditional norms and shackles, bravely express their opinions and emotions, and break through the way of existence of inherent thinking works [5].

#### **5 The participation of the audience and the reshaping of the existence of the work**

The existence of a work of art is not static, and the participation and understanding of the audience play a crucial role in the way the work exists. Audiences reacted to "Fountain" in a mixed manner, with some seeing it as a revolution in art and others as ridiculous. However, it is this diverse response that gives the work more meaning and value. The

participation of the audience is not only in the understanding and interpretation of the work, but also in the reshaping and redefinition of the work. The existence of the work is constantly enriched and extended by the participation of the audience.

## **6 Conclusion**

Taking Duchamp's "Fountain" as an example, it reveals a form of "existence of works" in artistic creation, and also brings people a lot of thinking about what art is. In Duchamp's eyes, he believed that there is no immutable standard for art, it depends on the way people appreciate it, and the value of art should not be limited to form and content, but more importantly, it should bring the ideological value it can bring to the viewer. It is precisely in this way that the existence of the work should be combined with materiality, concept and society, forming the rich connotation and meaning of the work, combined with the participation and response of the audience, so that the work is endowed with a unique meaning in the eyes of the viewer and is endowed with new connotations. The way a work exists does not need to be expressed in materials recognized by everyone, there is no immutable standard for art, and the way of existence of the meaning given to art by each person will be different.

## **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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