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READYMADE: A PROBLEM FOR THE DEFINITION OF ART AND ITS SOLUTION

Abstract: Did Marcel Duchamp, by introducing the idea and practice of the *readymade* into art, solve the problem of a new way of defining art, or did he rather create a problem that we are struggling with to this day? The *readymade* has an ambivalent status both in the eyes of the creator himself and his contemporary critics, such as Pierre Cabanne, Robert Lebel and his later biographer, Calvin Tomkins. The artist did not identify with Dada and the Surrealistic sense of using the *readymade*. For Duchamp, the *readymade* is an idea to overcome the crisis of art after Cubism. The *redymade* became the essence of his new definition of art. A further result was the Conceptual Art of Joseph Kosuth and new media, photography and film as art, as described by Rosalind Krauss in her essays on indexical art. The basis for an exemplification of the theses of the article is a case study of Józef Robakowski's photo-object entitled *Colander*. The photograph here was pierced with a *readymade* nail. This gesture of the artist towards the image was embedded in the history of art of the modernist avant-gardes. In the article, the history of the *readymade* was compared with another parallel history of sociological art. This trend has been studied in George Grosz and Wieland Herzfeld's *Art is in Danger*, Contextual and Anthropologized Art, and contemporary curatorial narrative practices. The case study, *Colander*, shows a relationship between storytelling and the art form. Duchamp thus both solved and at the same time created a problem for defining art.

Keywords: the readymade, conceptual art, information art, evidentiality art, contextual art, anthropologized art, photography as art, photo-object, definition of art

1. The *readymade* and the avant-garde

Setting directions

Did Marcel Duchamp solve the problem of a new definition of art through the *readymade*, or did he create a problem that we still struggle with today? The definition of art in the times of late Cubism, when Marcel Duchamp began his artistic career, became a controversial issue again. The controversy resulted from the fact that the Cubism of Picasso and Braque had become a canon, an aesthetic norm. Thus, it ossified and no longer served as a vehicle for changes in art. In other words, it turned into a classic of the avant-garde. In this role, it will inspire art and architectural decoration for many decades to come. Late Cubism was developing into a cult, as Duchamp could observe in the studio circle of his older brother, Gaston (Jacques Villon), in Puteaux, a Parisian suburb. As he himself claims, this social circle had no direct contact with Picasso and Braque¹. Duchamp: "Cubism interested me for only a few months"².

The intellectual climate of the Section d'Or (golden ratio) and Orphism circles, directly linked to the symbolism of Greek mythology, belonging to the repertoire of Academic Art *par excellence*, was saturated with metaphysics, esotericism and spiritualism, more than with artistic analyses. Duchamp loved multi-layered interpretations. However, at the same time, due to his penetrating, critical mind, these considerations were too detached from art itself and held little promise for redefining it. Although this was the line of development leading to abstract art, abstraction never became Duchamp's artistic goal. And *vice versa*, the other side, late Cubists, did not value him either. Story, often told, e.g., by Pierre Cabanne³ and Calvin Tomkins⁴, who often return to Duchamp's distancing himself from the Cubists, is that Duchamp was offended by the fact that his painting was not appreciated by his older colleagues, which is why he decided to choose a separate further creative path. However, psychoanalytic methodology will not be the basis for the considerations presented here, but an artistic and formal method will be used, based on analyzes of works of art. The painting that aroused the reluctance of orthodox post-Cubists was *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912), considered too futuristic. Exactly at this time, another groundbreaking and the first *readymade* work, *Bicycle wheel*, was created. Historically, around 1913, Duchamp charted two directions, two lines

¹ P. Cabanne, *Dialogs with Marcel Duchamp*, transl. R. Padgett, Da Capo Press, Inc., Boston, MA 1979, p. 23.

² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³ *Ibid.*, p.17.

⁴ C. Tomkins, *The World of Marcel Duchamp 1887-1968*, Time Life Books, New York 1966, p. 15.

of artistic development. One was the introduction of new media as art, as his cubistically stylized form draws on the photographic experiments of Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge from the 1880s and 1890s. This is the line of thought for some Futurists, although without too much consequence, because it was not continued in Conceptualism. The other direction focused on an item identical to a real one as an original work of art. Both led to a change in the definition of art and related terms, such as a work of art or an artist, an art institution or the art market, and the most radical breakthrough in contemporary art, which was Conceptual Art with its post-Conceptual consequences continuing in today's art.

So, did Marcel Duchamp, by introducing the idea and practice of the ready-made into art, solve or create a problem?

Criticism of Dada criticism

In the eyes of its creator himself, but also of his contemporary critics, such as Pierre Cabanne, Robert Lebel⁵ or the later biographer, Calvin Tomkins, the *Readymade* has an ambivalent status. It is neither a serious artistic revolution nor just a joke. It is like a word that, when spoken with a different accent, indicates the artistic context in which the author of the statement operates. Without directly quoting, Tomkins recalls a statement allegedly given by Duchamp: "the only way to be truly anti-artist is to be indifferent to it"⁶.

In Duchamp's time, there was another trend critical of the dominant Cubism, which foreshadowed Dadaism and surrealism. Duchamp wanted nothing to do with Dadaism. Like a good chess player, he anticipated several moves ahead. In an interview with Pierre Cabanne, he mentions the famous telegram to Jean Crotti, with the short statement "Pode bal" in response to an invitation to the Salon Dada at the Galerie Montaigne in Paris in 1921⁷.

The *Readymade* seems related and is often confused with the Surrealists and their *found objects*. The confusion is related to the fact that it was the same time. However, we must reach back to the sources of change in the definition of art after Cubism (and the fundamental question of this generation: "What to do after Cubism?") to see the difference between the answers given by Duchamp, Dadaists and Surrealists, and the role they assigned to the new *readymade* art. For the latter, the *readymade* was uncanny art, while for the former it was a hard-line art definition, changing the meaning of the concept of art

⁵ R. Lebel, *Marcel Duchamp*, translated by G. H. Hamilton, Grove Press, New York 1959.

⁶ C. Tomkins, *The World of Marcel Duchamp*, p. 77.

⁷ P. Cabanne, *Dialogs with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 65.

forever. Similarly, the contesting function of Dadaism is wrongly associated with the *readymade*, because it seems to be the best exemplification of the assumed departure from 'pure art'. However, it is this trend in Dada that assumes the transformation of art into sociology and activism. This is well represented in the text by George Grosz and Wieland Herzfelde, *Art is in Danger* [Die Kunst ist in Gefahr] from 1925, where the following sentence can be found: "Let us summarize: the meaning, nature and history of art are directly related to the meaning, nature and history of society"⁸. The text ends with the words: "Today's artist [...] finds a place in the army of the suppressed who fight for their just share of the word, for a significant social organization of life"⁹.

This position is continued in Peter Bürger's book *Theory of the Avant-garde*, the main assumption of which is that Dada is the only true avant-garde. This is because, according to the author, it assumes the abolition of art in social practice, which he often refers to in the text: "art is to be integrated into the praxis of life"¹⁰, "it is the liquidation of art as an activity that is split off from the praxis of life"¹¹, "the historical avant-garde movements not only intend a break with the traditional representational system but the total abolition of the institution that is art"¹². The assumption includes replacing it with committed social work, called the 'organic work of art' (after Gramsci's and Lukács' terms: 'organic artist' and 'organic intellectuals').

In Poland, the greatest supporter of the thesis on the avant-garde as anti-art was Stefan Morawski, who saw it as a harbinger of a greater crisis, or even a decline of art, which post-avant-garde had been since the 1970s (Morawski wrote mainly in Polish in the 1980s)¹³. His position and even exemplification were similar to those of the famous article by Robert Hughes, which perpetuated the myth of self-castration by Rudolf Schwarzkogel¹⁴. Thus, the avant-garde was not perceived as a positive formulation of a new definition of art. Rather, the conclusion of the avant-garde was the need to give up art. This trend towards sociology art was also present in Conceptual Art, e.g., at the

⁸ G. Grosz, and W. Herzfelde, *Art is in Danger*, in: *Dadas on Art*, ed. L. R. Lippard, Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1971, p. 84.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁰ P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, translated from the German by M. Shaw, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1984, p. 54.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹³ S. Morawski, *On the Avant-garde, Neo-avant-garde and the Case of Postmodernism*, "Literary Studies in Poland" 1989, no. 21, pp. 81-106.

¹⁴ R. Hughes, *The Decline and Fall of the Avant-Garde*, "Time", Monday, Dec. 18, 1972. <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,945209-2,00.html> [accessed: 12.07.2024].

Information exhibition (more information on the role of this exhibition is given below).

The *readymade* and Conceptual Art

Duchamp was an individualist, by character and choice, as proven by the biographical testimonies of the abovementioned authors. Despite his critical way of thinking about art, he did not turn to sociology, or look for a way of defining, understanding and interpreting outside art. It is the work, its form and artistic concept (creative act) that determines the definition of art, not the social context. It turned out that this is precisely where the great political power of works lies, especially after Joseph Kosuth turned the *readymade* into Conceptual Art. In Central Europe of the 1970s, during the period of Soviet domination in the region, Conceptual Art turned out to be political *par excellence*, despite a lack of any political content, as it was the polar opposite of Socialist Realism in a more or less literal figurative form, i.e., the official art of the totalitarian state authorities and a tool of government propaganda¹⁵.

It was Kosuth who treated the *readymade* with complete seriousness and respect for Duchamp's ideas. Only he understood the power of the *readymade* as a vehicle for changing the definition of art. His founding text-manifesto of Conceptual Art "Art after Philosophy" states: "All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually"¹⁶.

Rosalind E. Krauss considers the consequences of the *readymade* in a theoretical frame. Part 1, point 3 of her "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America"¹⁷ indicates that the basis for a possibility of a Conceptual definition of art is indexation – the shifter, an empty sign to be filled with meaning by indicating, i.e. the index. By its very structure, the shifter is a tautology, so it is a model form of Conceptual Art in its early analytical period. It is a model of art as information (Information Art or Evidentiality Art), presented through a wide selection of works (ca. 150 artists from 15 countries) at the *Information* exhibition in summer of 1970, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. It anchored the Conceptual trend in art history and was its historical beginning¹⁸.

¹⁵ See D. Elliott, and P. Juskiewicz, „Socialist Realism”, in: *Grove Art Online*, Oxford University Press 2003. Doi:10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.t079464 [accessed: 12.07.2024].

¹⁶ J. Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy*, in: *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, ed. G. Guercio, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1993 (2002), p. 18.

¹⁷ R. E. Krauss, *Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America. Part 1*, "October" Spring 1977, vol. 3, p. 69.

¹⁸ *Information*, ed. K. L. McShine, MoMA, New York 1970. Exh. cat. https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_2686_300337616.pdf [accessed: 12.07.2024].

The shifter is therefore a precondition of indexical art and the *readymade* at the same time – a work of art as a thing left unchanged, identical to a utilitarian object. Every *readymade* is therefore a tautology – at the beginning and in Duchamp's concept, and that is how it was supposed to appear in art. This is why the *readymade* gave rise to Conceptual Art and why Kosuth could say that all art after Duchamp is Conceptual. It was not supposed to be saturated with meaning from the beginning, like *found objects* in Surrealism.

However, in addition to the *readymade*, the shifter's design also enables photography as the *readymade* and therefore as art. Next to *readymade* photography, it is the second constitutive factor for Conceptual Art and thus for a new definition of art. This is the role of photography discussed in the quoted text by Krauss (Part 2)¹⁹. Citing Roland Barthes' text *Rhetorique de l'image*, in her own translation, she finds confirmation of her own indexical definition of photography (enabling photography as art in Conceptual Art). For Barthes, photography is “message sans code”²⁰, just as the shifter points to reality recorded by a camera. Thus, it is by its nature tautological like an indexical sign, evidential. It is pure information or a *readymade* image, like every photograph. All reading, interpretations, understanding, emotions, expressions and psychologizing come later – or not at all.

Photography is “mute presence of an uncoded event”²¹ – syntax that is a tautology, the core of Conceptual Art. Krauss cites many examples in his articles, but all artworks with such characteristics can be considered Conceptual, and thus characteristic of “art after Duchamp.”

2. Case study

The basis for exemplification of the article's hypotheses is a case study on Józef Robakowski's artwork-object *Colander*, created by the artist in 1960 (still in the artist's possession). *Colander* is an example of photography as an art tendency that will come along with Conceptual Art. Here it constitutes its pre-Conceptual harbinger building its momentum.

The photograph as the *readymade* was pierced with a *readymade* nail. This gesture by Robakowski towards the image has its history in the art of modernist avant-gardes, described later in the article. Via the *readymade*, Robakowski transforms the photograph as a picture into a photo-object. He creates a completely new category of works of art, based on photography as the *readymade*

¹⁹ R. E. Krauss, *Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America. Part 2*, “October” Autumn 1977, vol. 4, pp. 58-67.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

and a *readymade* object. Two lines of development of contemporary art, initiated by Duchamp as described above, are combined here.

Description

Technically speaking, *Colander* consists of a photograph of the original item glued onto a board. There is a nail piercing the photograph, going through the hanging hole on the colander's handle.

In the photo, the colander is presented vertically, with its handle upwards and the convexity of the bowl outwards, facing the viewer, in the manner we usually see it hanging in our kitchens. The colander was photographed without context. It is shown against a plain black background. The photograph, therefore, conveys an image of the object itself, removed from reality, deprived of interaction with the surroundings. Its hanging on the wall is also merely suggested by the vertical orientation of the photograph's composition. The artist here refers to common everyday experience. That is why he chose to photograph just the object, removing all other details.

The photograph

The photograph very precisely reproduces all the physical features of the colander. The author applied the principle of brutal photographic realism here. Achieving this effect was only possible thanks to the artist's mastery of the photographic technique. All details have been precisely reproduced: the bending sheet metal on the edges of the strainer bowl, chips and abrasions on the handle. The direct frontal light (flash) was equally precisely selected to show the physical features of the object – it is undoubtedly made of aluminum sheet and the black enamel-coated handle is metal.

All these details were carefully highlighted in the photograph to obtain a purely factual representation of the object, without any allusions or metaphors. The same motivation lies behind isolating it from its surroundings. Thanks to this method of photographic presentation, an ordinary kitchen object becomes distinguished and is extracted from its banality. Yet, at the same time, it is not deprived of it. Referring to the repertoire of avant-garde practices, it has been indicated. It resembles a Conceptual indexical photograph, many of which Robakowski took later, in the 1970s (e.g., photographs from the *Mine* and *Indications* series).

Robakowski selected his *readymades* based on assumptions similar to those made by Duchamp – he chose *anesthétique* objects. It is the same method of artistic dealing with objects.

It would be tempting to adopt a line of interpretation derived from Rene Magritte's canvas depicting a pipe isolated from its context ("This is Not a Pipe" - *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*), or from an earlier collection of texts by Denis Diderot: *This is Not a Story* [*Ceci n'est pas un conte*]. One would like to say: "This is Not a Colander", but that suggestion of multiple perspectives and interpretations is absent in the colander's image. It does not seem to stratify meanings and there is no "betrayal of the image", since it does not promise anything to the viewer and remains silent. *Colander* is a colander and nothing more than that. What you see is what you get. Comparing *Colander* with the pipe painted by Magritte suggests a difference. Surrealism would employ an object's image rather than a similarity.

Moreover, the piece does not consist solely of the colander's photograph, for the photo is glued to a board. However, the artist decided to leave clear traces of tearing the photographic paper on the edges. Accepting such imperfection, denying care to this detail combined with the meticulousness of the image's technical production, stems from the artist's intention to draw attention to the photograph's physicality. The viewer is thus reminded that they should not succumb to the superficial attractiveness of the hyperrealistic representation. This is also a way, just like removing the context (surroundings) of the presented object from the image, to question the notion of photography creating an illusion of reality, in favor of examining its structure. On the one hand, the artist cares about the realism of the subject, but on the other hand, he does not allow us to forget about the fact that we are dealing with a photographic image possessing specific technical parameters.

This approach to photography was still unknown in 1960. It would only appear with Conceptual Art. Before that, photography had been a homogeneous area, competition for painting. Conceptual Art broke this wholeness in the field of photography and found a new role for it in the process of redefining art (photography understood as representation). Thus, it separated the artistic use of photography from other ways of practising it.

The board

The photo of the colander is attached to a board - another element indicating the desire to emphasize the photograph's physicality. As in the case of the photo, the board's format is vertically elongated, but overall, it is larger than the photo. Thus, there remains a substantial margin around the image, a kind of *passee partout*. This allows the viewer to inspect the physical features of the board. There are no traces of intervention performed by the artist (such as painting or cleaning), which proves it to be just an ordinary object, found somewhere, perhaps a part of wooden furniture. Therefore, the board is a *readymade*

component in the structure of *Colander* as a work of art. On the one hand, the board complements and emphasizes the photograph's physicality. On the other hand, however, it deepens the illusion of reality within the representation – old kitchen furniture with a colander hanging there. The coarseness of the board is intended to match the crude representation of the colander. Here the artist refers again to the viewer's common experience, memorised cadres of similar kitchen interiors.

A comparison that would more accurately illustrate the sense of using this object by Robakowski puts his work next to the door from Duchamp's *Etant Donnes*. The history of the door is associated with the artist's memories from holidays in the French Pyrenees. In New York (currently at the Philadelphia Museum of Art), however, it is only an object of certain physical characteristics. It is visibly old and damaged, but isolated from its original context. Therefore, it is now devoid of the above associations.

However, in Robakowski's piece, neither the board nor the photographic image of the colander are intended to encode any meaning. They exist purely materially, represent their objectivity and are deprived of context, so as to avoid evoking meaning. Interpretations result from our habits and associations, and not directly from the piece or the suggestions of its creator.

The nail

The nail is another element of the work, driven into the board in the upper part of the photograph, through the hanging spot on the colander's handle, in line with the logic of its practicality. The nail protrudes from the board at a slight angle, pointing upwards, as if it was ready for something to be hung. It is solid, long, thick, much too large to perform the function of holding the quite light colander. This is also a *readymade* – a finished, industrially produced, utilitarian object, used in accordance with its technical function, i.e., fixed within a surface. Undoubtedly, the nail contributes to increasing the illusory character of the representation. However, its selection results to a greater extent from the intention to expose it and mark its existence in the composition. The nail is the element of the piece that viewers pay the most attention to. It remains the most unusual component of the entire work. Its use proves the artist's courage to make a risky gesture without precedent, something that the audience is not familiar with and may react critically to. Indeed, this was just the case – anecdotes describing reactions of 'photography gurus' have been eagerly quoted by Robakowski himself²². Employing the nail was contrary to the contemporary

²² For example, in English in the exhibition catalog *Józef Robakowski. Istota Idei*, ed. M. Szymańska-Korejwo, Muzeum Narodowe w Gdańsku, Gdańsk 2012, p. 74; with the reproduction of *Colander*.

standard concept of photography, since it violated the integrity of the work. It was, therefore, perceived as a foreign element in the structure of the piece, and as such unnecessary. At the same time, it was the nail that made *Colander* an innovative artwork. This is the type of an intuitive discovery which turns out to be significant after some time. Only then does it begin to bring artistic benefits and pave new paths for creativity. Around 1970, Conceptual Art appeared in Poland and in Robakowski's work, providing notions that would justify the use of the nail.

The nail attracts attention. More than the colander, it is of key importance in the process of understanding or interpreting this work. However, among the documentation of the exhibitions where *Colander* was presented, the author has not found a single curator who would decide to showcase the nail by, for instance, providing appropriate lighting, so that it could cast a strong and clear (not accidental) shadow. Meanwhile, the use of light and the play of light and shadow as a means of arranging a display of a photographic object is exceptionally appropriate. Moreover, it highlights the structural aspects of the employed new media in a work of art. Light can also draw the viewer's attention to the nail as the key element of the piece. It may as well cast a different shadow in each case.

The nail acts as a certain link between *Colander* and the history of avant-garde art. Another nail, painted illusionally, with a shadow suggesting three-dimensionality (as in a *trompe l'oeil* painting), played a key role in the Cubist revolution – a breakthrough moment in the development of modern art. One of its initiators, Georges Braque, created at least two paintings with a nail protruding from the surface of the canvas, the effect being achieved illusionistically (by means of an optical illusion). One of them was *Violin and Palette* (1909, currently at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York), where the palette hangs on a nail. Then there is *Violin and Pitcher* (1910, currently at the Kunstmuseum Basel), where musical sheets of paper are attached to a wall with a nail. Both paintings' formats have vertically elongated proportions and in each of them the nail is located at the very top of the composition. In the former, it is slightly moved to the left, while in the latter it is placed centrally, and in both cases it is directed slightly upwards, naturally in accordance with its practical function. Applying the principles of the illusionistic technique means that in both cases the nail casts a shadow – in the first painting to the left, in the second one to the right, slightly downwards. The shadow is placed in accordance with the possibilities of the Cubist value composition, as it must be presented against a lighter background.

During the period mentioned above, Braque painted several other paintings where the object illusionistically 'protrudes' from a mosaic of geometric forms (e.g., *Candlestick*, at least two versions). In the development of the

Cubist form, this was the moment when Picasso and Braque reached the brink of abstraction in their artistic analyses. However, it was not abstraction that they were seeking, but bringing reality: landscape, figures or still life into accord with the flat surface of a painting. According to them, a three-dimensional solid should be distributed on a two-dimensional plane. They achieved this by observing the play of light and shadow on a given object. Then they reflected it on canvas through an arrangement of triangular forms, painted *chiaroscuro*, in extreme contrast and with the complete omission of colour. This was realism, but without imitation and still consistent with the nature of painting on canvas. So, when a motif in a painting became almost completely illegible, they strove to restore its connection to reality. One of Braque's methods was the use of illusionism with one element incorporated into a system of geometric forms. That is why a nail that casts a shadow appeared in Cubist art. Braque was more prepared to employ such means than Picasso, since he was a decorator by profession, able to illusionistically imitate veneers or marble. He was also more willing to subject his painting to a certain discipline than exuberant, expressive Picasso.

The nail, symbolising traditional methods of painting representations of reality, seems to be a retreat from the cubist experiment. However, this return to realism in the painting manner of Braque and Picasso led to another invention that would revolutionize contemporary art - collage. Its true beginning lies with a nail that is fixed into a wall, casting an illusory shadow.

The nail driven by Robakowski into the photograph of the colander has a similar potential to revolutionize art. Technically, it is about increasing the brutal and uncompromising realism of the colander's representation, but at the same time the colander is a *readymade*.

Duchamp used this effect in the painting *Tu m'* (1918, currently at the Yale University Art Gallery). This is a unique image for several reasons. Firstly, it is the last canvas painted by the artist. It was commissioned by his sponsor and lover, Katherine S. Dreier. Its format was to fit the upper compartment of her bookcase. Moreover, the painting serves as a review of Duchamp's *readymade* pieces, since it depicts shadows of certain objects. From the left, there is a bicycle wheel and a corkscrew. The latter was not included in Arturo Schwarz's *catalogue raisonné*, but we know that most of the artefacts were lost while moving studios and Duchamp himself would not pay much attention to specific objects, remaining true to his own *readymade* assumptions. In any case, Duchamp certainly did have a corkscrew. As a useful object, it fits the anaesthetic criteria. Further to the right, a shadow of a hat rack was painted sideways, which corresponds with the way it was hung at the artist's New York studio (as evidenced by documentary photographs). The canvas is torn and literally held together with safety pins in its centre. A bottle cleaning brush, a *readymade*,

grows out of the hole in the painting's surface at a right angle. There is no painted shadow here, though it could always appear with appropriate lighting. Since the painting was placed high up, and in a photo of Dreier's office there is a ceiling lamp, the shadow would be projected downwards. There is also a painted patch of light colour, as if a background prepared for such an illusory effect.

The *readymade* shadows are composed in the canvas in such a way that they touch each other, creating a sequence that suggests their semantic connection. Without moving into further interpretation here, let us pay attention to two factors only. Firstly, the painting was created for a person who Duchamp had a personal, even intimate relationship with. In a photograph of Dreier's office interior, we can see that *Tu m'* is adjacent to *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, also known as *The Large Glass*, which was then in her possession, and which is full of both erotic allusions and illusionistic solutions. Secondly, the bottle brush protruding from the painting is located in the area of Duchamp's well-known metaphor: the bottle dryer is a 'hedgehog' of rods to stick bottles on (absent here as a shadow, as it had been lost in France). Instead, we have the corkscrew for opening them (*tire-bouchon*), with a painted streak extending the screw, so that it connects with the bicycle wheel (originally a mobile) and the brush for cleaning bottles inside. The image of the object and the *readymade* element complement each other in order to create the most evocative representation.

Duchamp was fascinated by games with linguistic etymologies, so here the interpretation cannot be prolonged – language leads us through the thicket of meanings and their erotic overtones are brought to the fore. The title *Tu m'* (You... me...) also hints towards the artist's relationship with Dreier (there are other readings suggested in the literature on the subject, but this one seems most consistent with the situational context of the work in question).

There is no direct evidence that Duchamp was familiar with Braque's paintings featuring nails. However, he knew the problem that Braque solved with the use of them perfectly well. Duchamp was maturing artistically in an environment that attempted to continue the Cubist experiment after the first (analytical) phase.

In 1913, Duchamp met Man Ray, who considered the shadow effect to be the essence of photographic experiment. They began working closely. Duchamp's matured as an artist at that moment in the process of modern art development when various aspects of *chiaroscuro* were temporarily of great importance. Therefore, colour never played a role in his work.

History of Art

At the time of its creation, *Colander* (1960) had no analogies in art or photography, neither in Poland nor worldwide, not even in the work of Robakowski himself.

According to Robakowski's own categorization, *Colander* is considered a 'primary gesture'²³. Other photographs of the artist from that period include *informel* works presenting painterly effects obtained with the use of photographic means, as well as photographs with highly analytical compositions, revealing the artist's focus on structural questions, which would bring extremely interesting artistic solutions in the Conceptual Art decade. Still, these works were lined with metaphorical thinking intended to create impressions - a more emotional reception. Before Conceptual Art, this was how photography was typically understood in Poland and around the world. An object did not appear in a photograph as an independent subject, but as a symbol supporting a certain metaphor. There is no metaphor in *Colander* and the photo is completely free from non-formal, non-artistic references. To be entirely honest, the artist did admit in a private conversation that it was a colander from his mother's kitchen, but nothing in the work itself suggests this personal, emotional relationship. It remains concealed by the visual form (as in another piece rooted in the relationship with his mother: *Feet*, 1959). Objects presented so independently, in the style of brutal realism, could be seen as photographic works at the retrospective exhibition of the Zero-61 photographic group, at the so-called Old Forge in Toruń in 1969, almost a decade later²⁴.

According to trends of avant-garde developments in photo-film media, just like in surrealist photographs, an object appears as a reference to typical content of this movement. It suggests unexpected encounters, possible in one's imagination, dreams, or in the state of mental illness. An object does not appear here independently without metaphorical 'support'. The same applies to Dadaist and Surrealist objects. Here again, it would be tempting to compare *Colander* with them in order to build an interpretation. Indeed, in terms of appearance, they are similarly complex compositions, but by definition they emphasize the absurdity and illogicality of combinations more strongly than Robakowski's work. An in-depth analysis indicates a more important difference.

²³ See the artist's home page www.robakowski.eu.

²⁴ See *Józef Robakowski*, eds. T. Maler, and M. Jachula. Spector Books, Leipzig 2011. Exh. cat., Ludlow38, New York. In English and German. Collection of artist's texts and statements, documents and photographs. About exhibition at the Forge, pp. 2-5. See also: *Toruńska grupa fotograficzna „Zero-61”: przypomnienie*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 2001. Exh. cat.

While Dada-Surrealist objects seem to always have a suggestion of content, *Colander* is perfectly contentless.

Man Ray created Dada-Surrealist metaphorical objects, too. Objects also appear in his photographic and film experiments, but there they serve as models for studying lighting and achieving abstract effects, so no object has an independent role.

Colander was created in the exact same year that New Realism was founded, the latter being the leading trend of the European avant-garde throughout the entire decade of the 1960s. *Readymades* played a very important role in it. Yet, New Realists found their point of reference in popular culture, which was developing dynamically at that time, inspiring art in a more or less critical way. In Polish art, such references can be observed in the work of Kantor and Włodzimierz Borowski. As for other leading trends of the 1960s, objects played a similar role in Arte Povera as they did in New Realism.

American pop art was more closely linked to the iconography of mass production and culture than New Realism. Fluxus was based on post-Dada-Surrealist patterns and focused mostly on its creators' self-presentation. In *Colander* we will not find references to any of the abovementioned artistic questions of the decade. It presents an object and a photographic image without context. It does not refer to the discourse of popular culture, or highlight the artist, though it does raise a question concerning the definition of art itself, answered much later by Conceptual Art, which redefined the status of an object in a work of art.

In the Polish history of new media art, the wardrobe in Themersons' film *The Adventure of a Good Citizen* (1937) appears as a political object-metaphor, as it does in the famous remake etude directed by Roman Polański, *Two Men and a Wardrobe* (1958). Steam locomotives photographed by Witkacy approximately between 1899 and 1900 remain souvenirs of situations observed at the railway station in Zakopane, accompanied by factual descriptions which make the work a kind of information art that is based, among others, on creating a database (indexing). Therefore, it brings to mind artistic strategies of Conceptual Art artists and contemporary ways of employing photography in art²⁵.

²⁵ See an interview with Józef Robakowski by Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Interview with Józef Robakowski*, in: *Józef Robakowski: Nearer-Farther*, ed. B. Czubak, Mousse Publishing, Milano 2017, p. 27.

"What is also important is that there was almost no Dadaism in Poland - it hardly got any exposure before the war. Even Witkacy, the most absurd artist of them all, dissociated himself from it. Only at the film school did such tradition appear, brought by Stefan Themerson, Jerzy Toeplitz (as the school's director), Andrzej Munk and then Roman Polański." Catalog of photographs.

Before Conceptual Art, no one in the history of artistic photography would radically separate an object from its context, neither in the history of international avant-garde, nor in Poland.

Characteristics

As a photographic object, *Colander* is a coherent piece in terms of the selected elements and their interconnection within the composition. At the same time, each of them (the photo of the colander, the board and the nail) has its own characteristics. Thus, they belong with the broadly drawn corpus of *readymades*, as they serve no other function than self-representation. They were deprived of the context that could be used to describe them, except for relationships existing between the objects forming the piece. Robakowski entered into dialogue with Duchamp's *readymades* in works called photo-objects by the artist, according to his categorization. Examples include *Bicycle Wheel* (an interactive tautological object, a bicycle wheel mounted against the photograph of a wheel on a board, 1969) and *Comb* (an interactive photograph on a board composed of movable pieces, 1971), created about a decade after *Colander*, so already at the time when Duchamp had been proclaimed the patron of Conceptual Art by Kosuth in his article *Art after Philosophy* (1969).

There is another version of *Colander* under the same title, created in 1968 (currently at the Centre of Contemporary Art in Toruń), but it is more photographic and less object-oriented. It is a photograph of another colander, glued onto a board adapted to the photo format, with a nail set in the same manner as in the first version. So, the board is not a *readymade* here. The colander photographed for this piece can be seen in its natural surroundings in Robakowski's film *After a Human* (1969), which documents rooms in the apartment of the artist's deceased aunt. The artist employs the same strategy of pointing to an object in connection with a film about objects, which proves the *readymade* as a solid artistic means. *Colander 1* foreshadows *Colander 2*, strengthening the work's truly pre-Conceptual position in art. After eight years, *Colander* (an object and the object) reappears as a herald of the Conceptual Art breakthrough – a trend that would soon dominate the art scene for nearly two decades.

The object is technically a collage, and as a collage it combines a photographic image with real objects (things) or their elements. Still, they retain their autonomy because their physical nature is maintained. The components of *Colander* were brought together into a composition with the use of the dialectical method. That is, they became a new entity, different from the parts comprising it. The means used to create some illusion of reality (the nail driven into the board on which the colander is hung) were chosen in such a way that the whole became incoherent. The photograph and the *readymade* components do

not harmonize with each other, but rather constitute counterpoints. They are perceived independently, and the whole is neither homogeneous, nor heterogeneous. Their perception is not holistic (as in *gestalt*). Instead, it is a combination of points, different parts of the object.

Exposition

On the one hand, *Colander* leads us to Cubism as a source of avant-gardes, but on the other hand it looks ahead to Conceptual Art. Cubism started an artistic revolution in painting, and thus in modernist art. Conceptual Art concluded the era of modernism and avant-gardes, opening new paths for development: postmodern and post-avant-garde art leading to post-Conceptual modernity. One can imagine the nail, illuminated in such a way that it casts two shadows in two opposing directions, weaving through the image like the shadows of the *readymades* in Duchamp's *Tu m'*.

Properly lit, *Colander* could hang next to paintings by Braque and Duchamp, and Joseph Kosuth's piece from the *One and Three series* (1965, many versions). It could also be placed between *In Advance of the Broken Arm (Shovel)* by Duchamp (1915) and *One and Three (Shovel)* by Kosuth (unfortunately, there is not a piece in the series that features a nail). In this series of Kosuth's works, any object appears independently, self-referentially, without context, purely factually, as both a *readymade* and its photographic image. It is a Conceptual form of representation. The chair used by Kosuth in the first *One and Three* realization is also the first object set in this role in a work of art. Thus, it became the sign of contemporary times, a reference point observed by many artists. Finally, *Colander* has been placed in art history.

In this narration, *Colander* takes the position of a 'pivot'. While creating it, Robakowski took over the ideas and artistic means of the historical avant-garde, then passed them on and placed them in the present day. And still, they set the paths followed by art today²⁶.

3. Conclusion

While the question formulated at the beginning cannot be answered unambiguously, the discourse it evokes can be developed. This is the value that an art

²⁶ Personal statement of Józef Robakowski about his experiences as a photo-media artist, in English. See *Józef Robakowski: Art is Power! (Breaking Photography)*, in: *Józef Robakowski: Art is Power! Breaking Photography*, ed. Józef Robakowski, Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Filmowa, Telewizyjna i Teatralna im. L. Shillera w Łodzi [The Polish National Film, Television and Theater School in Łódź], Łódź 2016, pp. 11-17. Catalogue of photography.

historian can bring to cultural research and the social functioning of art. However, it is not only about historical interpretations. In postmodern and post-Conceptual art, the *readymade* plays a role in building contextual discourses of contemporary times. Duchamp's *readymade* work *Fountain* is one of the most frequently cited works in the history of art, as described by Robert Kilroy²⁷.

Duchamp was one of those artists who wrote little. However, his main texts concern the *readymade* case. They are a tool to criticise post-Cubist art and change the definition of art. In the art-zine “The Blind Man”, no. 2 (April 1917)²⁸, *The Richard Mutt Case* was described, i.e. the entire game that took place around the *Fountain*. Duchamp shows his ambivalence in his approach to the *readymade*, tacitly (few participants in the debate knew that he was the author) accepting all interpretations, without explaining his position. Only in a much later text *Apropos of 'Readymades'* (1961) does he indicate their main feature and method of selecting these items, i.e., “complete anaesthesia”²⁹ – exclusion of senses, taste, emotions or aesthetic impressions. They are empty and they always will be. If they are open, then in this sense they are never filled with meaning. This allowed Kosuth to formulate his answer to the question of art definition in Conceptual Art: art is ‘making meaning’ and form is the ‘form of presentation’ (of these meanings)³⁰.

Duchamp's most important text-manifesto is *The Creative Act* (1957)³¹, which ends with: “All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone;

²⁷ R. Kilroy, *Marcel Duchamp's Fountain: One Hundred Years Later*. Palgrave Pivot 2018.

²⁸ [M. Duchamp], *The Richard Mutt Case* [1917] “The Blind Man,” eds. Marcel Duchamp with Beatrice Wood and Henri-Pierre Roché, 2 issues. New York: Henri Pierre Roché, 1917. https://monoskop.org/images/6/6f/The_Blind_Man_2_May_1917.pdf [accessed: 12.07.2024].

²⁹ M. Duchamp, *Apropos of "Readymades"*, first Published in: “Art and Artists” (London), 1, no. 4. (July 1966), p. 47. repr. in M. Sanouillet, and E. Peterson, eds. *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, Thames and Hudson, London 1973, pp. 141-142. https://monoskop.org/images/8/8e/Duchamp_Marcel_1961_1975_Apropos_of_Readymades.pdf [accessed: 12.07.2024].

See M. Sanouillet, and E. Peterson, eds. *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, Thames and Hudson, London 1973. https://monoskop.org/images/a/a9/Duchamp_Marcel_The_Essential_Writings_of_Marcel_Duchamp.pdf [accessed: 12.07.2024].

³⁰ Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After. Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, ed. G. Guercio, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1993 (2002). See especially articles: 1975 (First published 1975), pp. 129-143; *Within the Context: Modernism and Critical Practice* (first published 1977), pp. 153-167; *Comments on the Second Frame* (first published 1977), pp. 169-173; *Text/Context: Seven Remarks for You to Consider while Viewing/Reading this Exhibition* (first published 1979), pp. 179-182; *No Exit* (first published 1988), pp. 227-234.

³¹ M. Duchamp, *The Creative Act* [1957], first published in: “Art News” Summer 1957, vol. 56, no. 4, pp. 28-29; reprinted in M. Sanouillet, and E. Peterson, eds. *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, Thames and Hudson, London 1973, pp. 138-140. https://monoskop.org/images/7/7c/Duchamp_Marcel_1957_1975_The_Creative_Act.pdf [accessed: 12.07.2024].

the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.” Duchamp is aware of the consequences. With the *readymade*, the recipient enters the scene as a beholder, one who is *de facto* a co-author, as they fill the void of an empty artwork as a *readymade* with their own deciphered content. This is a new definition of art, a work of art, the role of the artist, the institution of galleries and museums towards art and the relationships of buying and selling objects on the art market.

The expanded *readymade* formula served to create ‘anthropologized art’, as Kosuth called and described it in one of his many texts – *The Artist as Anthropologist* manifesto (first published in “The Fox” art-zine no. 1, 1975). This article defining the new role of the artist includes the following statement: “The artist-as-anthropologist, as a student of culture, has as his job to articulate a model of art, the purpose of which is to understand culture by making its implicit nature explicit – internalize its ‘explicitness’ (making it, again, ‘implicit’) and so on”³². And he warns us it is not a circular process, because it is dynamic and exchangeable, and it is a general model, not related to a particular culture. Art has become part of cultural anthropology.

In the same period, a similar position was adopted in Poland by Jan Świdziński, which resulted in his theory of “Art as Contextual Art”³³. However, then there is a threat of changing the history of art into the sociology of art (culture), which Jan Białostocki warns us against³⁴. At the same time, protecting art against over-interpretation detached from a work of art, he postulated an extension of the three levels of artwork interpretation by Erwin Panofsky (pre-iconographic, iconographic and iconological) with a fourth level – social interpretation. It is true that his theory did not concern works of Conceptual Art, but the Modern era and Modernism. Nevertheless, the postulate is valid – art should be anchored in the contexts of its era (the meaning of oranges in Van Eyck vs. oranges in Cezanne). This is a new role for art, decreed by the *readymade* emergence.

³² J. Kosuth, *The Artist as Anthropologist*, in: *Art After Philosophy and After. Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, ed. G. Guercio MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1993 (2002), p. 124.

³³ Contextual Art (Art as Contextual Art), a term coined by Jan Świdziński (1923-2014). The text of the manifesto *12 points of contextual art* was first published in 1976 by the St Petri gallery in Lund in English on the occasion of the exhibition. Publication in Polish and English: J. Świdziński, *Art as Contextual Art*, Galeria Remont, Warszawa 1978. Contextualism became the theoretical basis for the artistic phenomena of late conceptualism and the development of post-tautological and post-Conceptual Art. See <http://swidzinskistudies.pl> [accessed: 12.07.2024].

³⁴ J. Białostocki, *Historia sztuki wśród nauk humanistycznych*, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1980, pp.108, 111-112.

In the sense of art in the process of formulating the definition of Conceptual Art, *Colander* is a non-sentimental anaesthetic work, just like the *readymade* by Duchamp. At the same time, like Duchamp, Robakowski included personal threads in his work, which were never explicitly stated. *Colander* also comes from such a context (*Colander 1* is from his mother's apartment and *Colander 2* is from the apartment of Robakowski's deceased aunt). Biographers make guesses about them and reconstruct their meaning from the authors' statements and the testimonies of others. However, they create their own stories in doing so, which only to some extent tell the story of the artist himself, or the story of art history.

The use of the *readymade* in artistic research³⁵ based on facts and artifacts is a springboard for cultural discourses told via art by curators. "Since the original context of artworks at the time of their first public exhibition, including the participation of the curator, has been often determined by the artwork in the case of Conceptual Art, it is crucial to take the curatorial histories and methodologies of Conceptual Art into account to define the current ontological condition of conceptual works of art"³⁶. Storytelling defines art today. More stories will be told in the next generation of curators.

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³⁵ J. Klein, *What is artistic research?* Academia.edu, https://www.academia.edu/9983441/What_is_artistic_research [accessed: 12.07.2024].

³⁶ N. Zonnenberg, *Conceptual Art in a Curatorial Perspective, Between Dematerialization and Documentation*, Valiz, Amsterdam 2019, p. 77.

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READYMADE: PROBLEM DEFINICJI SZTUKI I JEGO ROZWIĄZANIE (streszczenie)

Czy Marcel Duchamp wprowadzając do sztuki ideę i praktykę *readymade* rozwiązał problem nowego sposobu definiowania sztuki, czy raczej stworzył problem, z którym zmagamy się ze sztuką do dziś? *Readymade* zarówno w oczach samego twórcy, ale i współczesnych mu krytyków, jak Pierre Cabanne, Robert Lebel czy późniejszego biografa Calvina Tomkinsa, ma status ambivalentny. Artysta nie identyfikował się z Dada i Surrealistycznym sensem użycia *readymade*. Dla Duchampa, *readymade* jest pomysłem na przełamanie kryzysu sztuki po kubizmie. *Readymade* stał się istotą jego nowej definicji sztuki. Dalszym rezultatem była sztuka konceptualna Josepha Kosutha oraz nowe media, fotografia i film jako sztuka, co opisała Rosalind Krauss w jej esejach na temat indexical art. Podstawą egzemplifikacji tego artykułu jest studium przypadku fotobiektu Józefa Robakowskiego pt. *Durszlak*. Fotografia tytułowego przedmiotu została przebita gwóźdźmiem *readymade*. Ten gest artysty wobec obrazu został osadzony w historii sztuki awangard modernistycznych. W artykule historia *readymade* została zestawiona z inną paralelną historią,

sztuki socjologicznej. Ten trend został przestudiowany poczynając od Geoga Grosza i Wielanda Herzfelde *Art is in Danger* po contextual art i anthropologized art i współczesne kuratorskie praktyki narracyjne. Studium przypadku, *Durszlak*, pokazuje relacje między historią opowiadaną a formą artystyczną. Duchamp więc zarazem rozwiązał i stworzył problem definicji sztuki.

Słowa kluczowe: readymade, sztuka konceptualna, information art, evidentiality art, sztuka kontekstualna, sztuka zantropologizowana, fotografia jako sztuka, foto-obiekt, definicja sztuki

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