

Artistic concepts of readymade art- Between Materials and Ideas

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Abstract

This research sheds light on the concepts of readymade art in contemporary sculpture, and the different methods of utilizing ready objects through selected case studies of the works of contemporary sculptors, and to show through their works how they deploy readymade or found objects in their creations.

Readymade objects have played a key role in changing the philosophy of contemporary sculpture and what became known as three dimensional modelling. The research deals specifically with the problem of the concept of readymade sculpture as art and that it is not limited to found objects or the deletion or addition to include assembly and modifications to create novel three dimensional artworks.

In general, some artists resorted to express their ideas with ready-made media without resorting to compilation or to any modification through sculptural interventions. Others, selected objects of a certain form in a special way in order to re-employ them and modify them in new sculptural forms. Accordingly, this research aims to explore the variety of approaches involved in the utilization of ready-made and found objects in contemporary art, and to reveal to what extent did the use of readymade objects provide the artist with the means by which he or she can express their own ideas in a novel way. The uses of readymade art were also inseparable from its role as conceptual art and in connecting art to human affairs and world culture since WWI.

Keywords:

Readymade, three dimensional arts, found objects, contemporary sculpture, conceptual art, art and society.

Problematic

The concept of sculpture has changed over time leading to a confusion of concepts and terms. Here lies the problematic of this research which attempts to re-examine what has been traditionally referred to as “sculpture” in light of new experimentation of artistic creations under the label of “sculpture”.

Hypothesis

This research is guided by the hypothesis that the introduction of readymade art revolutionized how sculpture is viewed and practiced.

Relevance

This research clarifies the problems facing artists, art critics and audience with regard to the use of readymade and found objects in contemporary art. The research also sheds light on current directions in art with their effects on art appreciation.

Geographic Limits

USA and Europe.

Method

Critical, analytical study of a selected number of case studies.

Introduction

Readymade sculpture was inaugurated by Marcel Duchamp. His earliest readymade works included *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913¹, a wheel mounted on a wooden stool, and *in Advance of the Broken Arm* of 1915, a snow shovel inscribed with that title. Four years later in New York, Duchamp shocked the art world with his most celebrated readymade, *Fountain*, a men's urinal exhibited placed on its back². It was signed by the artist with a false name. For his readymade sculpture, Duchamp deliberately chose ordinary, everyday objects. He invented the term “readymade” for his own art, a term that recently has become more generally applied to artworks made from manufactured objects.



Duchamp Bicycle wheel 2013

The main element that makes a readymade object a work of art is that it was “artistically” selected. The “artist” chose it and made it into an exhibition item providing the “ordinary” readymade object with an extraordinary aesthetic or other artistic value.

It was not important that the artist did not make it. It was enough that he chose it, gave it a name, exhibited it in an artistic environment giving it a new value and subjecting it to the gaze of onlookers. His choice embodied not only aesthetic consideration but also a specific point of view. By so doing, the artist, first of all, engaged in a creative artistic act and cancelled or obviated its functional use in everyday life. Moreover, the exhibition, presentation and the acting of “naming” the object convey ideas that may not have originally been associated with the object. This shift from “making” to “choosing” may be related to the movement known as “conceptual art”.

Duchamp's Bicycle Wheel carried and expressed ideas invoking the world of mechanization and mass production. The term was already used to distinguish objects that weren't handmade, but impersonally manufactured. As such Duchamp used a readymade expression to refer to his New “readymade” art. However, later on the term was used for manufactured items.

From there, Duchamp elaborated his terminology. *Bicycle Wheel* was an “assisted” readymade, or a work that linked two or more objects together. Later he created a “rectified” readymade when he altered an existing object, such as a print of the *Mona Lisa* by drawing a mustache). He also created what was called a “reciprocal” readymade, as in using a painting to become an ironing board).

Readymade art provokes the viewers and engages them in thinking about the meaning of the object and the meaning of art itself. By turning the wheel into a sculpture, Duchamp made it, as in other artworks, e.g., a marble statute, untouchable. Duchamp's selection of a urinal that he signed by the name of



M. Duchamp, Fountain 2017

“R. Mutt” and titled *Fountain*, triggered conflicting reactions varying from its function in ordinary life as a “urinal” to the contradiction by the word “fountain” and the appropriateness of the exhibition of a urinal in a museum and the very nature of what is art. Over the years, Perhaps, the real point of the readymade artworks, was that art can be anything and can be made from any material as its starting point.

Readymade sculpture is it art? Art between Visual Impact and Intellectual Provocation

Duchamp’s “fountain” called into question the meaning of “art” and whether art can be anything? If it is anything then what distinguishes art from anything else? The legend of this notorious artwork began when Duchamp decided to submit an artwork under the name of R. Mutt to the Society of Independent Artists’ salon in New York—which claimed that they would accept any work of art. However, his work was rejected as a practical joke from an unknown person.

Duchamp’s “Fountain” shifted attention in how art is perceived from “object” to “concept” . This made the *Fountain to be the* most intellectually captivating and challenging art piece of the 20th century. It called into question what is a work of art? Are ideas enough to create a work of art? Who decides? Does it have to be made by the artist?

Duchamp’s *Fountain* challenged established notions of art, artists, creativity, originality, even seriousness in art. It did not depend on the aesthetics and visual appeal, but on the intellectual message resulting from it. The readymade artworks were a reaction to what Duchamp viewed as a stale art with “beauty” or visual effects at its core. From this perspective, Duchamp belongs with the Cubists, Dadaists, Futurists and later on Surrealists to a society shaken up by war(s) and in need of a new form of equally unsettling and thought provoking art.³

In many ways, the readymade is the direct ancestor of all conceptual art that followed, in that it allowed artists to consider and refine the crafting and presentation of an idea rather than focusing on material means. [Conceptual art](#) in the 1960s and 1970s focused on "the dematerialization of the art object"—in the phrase of critic **Lucy Lippard**—in favor of documentation of ideas, actions, and [processes](#) as artworks⁴.

Readymade sculpture redefining sculpture as three-dimensional art

In the wake of the use of “readymade” art, other terms have emerged. One can notice in the fields of modern and contemporary sculpture several conflicting terms to refer to three-dimensional artistic practices⁵. This creates terminological imprecision as well as artistic ambiguity. Generally speaking, three-dimensional artworks as sculpture assume a variety of forms including ready-made objects. Some artists chose ready-made items selected from garbage dumps and discarded objects.

Readymade art –From Found to Fabricated

In the 1900s that artists began to incorporate found objects into sculptural works as an artistic gesture. For example, **Pablo Picasso's** *Still Life With Chair Caning* from 1912⁶, for example, the artist collaged a piece of woven chair backing onto a two-dimensional canvas, and before that **Degas** clothed his *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years* (1881)⁷ in a real tutu. The term "found object" is a literal translation from the French *objet trouvé*. In art, this meant objects or products

with no artistic functions that are placed into an art context and made part of an artwork. The readymade artworks represent an updated version of that idea.



Still-Life with Chair Caning, 1912 by Pablo Picasso



Edgar Degas, Little Dancer Aged Fourteen 1880–1, cast c.1922

In recent decades, artists have continued to explore ways of putting readymade objects into their work. German artist [Isa Genzken](#)⁸, who recently had a major retrospective at MoMA, is well known for her sculptural work since the early 2000s, which is made up of both items that the artist finds on the city street and high-end pieces of designer furniture purchased from stores. For more than thirty years, Isa Genzken has been developing a versatile oeuvre, continually extending it by adding new aspects. Her settings, her unusual combinations of materials, and the fragile but monumental character of her constructions reflect the surrounding world and the fragility of human existence. Her artworks—which include sculptures and installations, as well as photography, collage, and films, explore the

space between public claims and private artistic autonomy, thus defining an interface where personal and the social views meet.



Isa Genzken, Exhibition view, Secession 2006, Photo: Pez Hejduk

Other artists, like [Haim Steinbach](#)⁹, have crafted visual languages that place everyday goods in arrangements that use repetition and formal contrast to push even further the idea that artist's role is to select items and serve them up in unexpected or meaningful juxtapositions. **Steinbach** is an American artist known for his precise arrangements of found objects on shelves. Working within the tradition of [Marcel Duchamp](#), Steinbach explores the role of the artist as a collector and curator of cultural artifacts. Over the decades, Steinbach's project has grown to explore collecting as a psychological state of mind, while also acting as a barometer of consumer culture.



Haim Steinbach, Backyard Story (1997)

Fabricating Readymade into three-dimensional art

Using the materials at hand, Judith Scott¹ spontaneously invented her own unique and radically different form of artistic expression. While other students were stitching, she was sculpting with an unprecedented zeal and concentration.

Taking whatever objects she found, regardless of ownership, she would wrap them in carefully selected colored yarns to create diverse sculptures of many different shapes. Some resemble cocoons or body parts, while others are elongated totemic poles.

Scott's work has become immensely popular in the world of outsider art.



Judith Scott, Chair <https://granta.com/entwined/>

Readymade art and Mixed Media

One of the most important elements used from ready-made objects to stimulate the imagination is the photograph. Artists often mix them in the artworks using cutting, pasting, assembling and repeating the image in a certain pattern, which leads to a different concept, and may make it lose some of the original functions so that it becomes an expression of what is in the artist's mind. One of the pioneers of this trend is "Rauschenberg".

As in Figure 16 called "Odyssey", in which the sculptor used stuffed animals, cushions and a wooden box. He used these objects as ready-made things as they are with sculptural modifications.

Robert Rauschenberg¹ worked in a wide range of mediums including painting, sculpture, prints, photography, and performance, over the span of six decades. He



emerged on the American art scene at the time that Abstract Expressionism was dominant, and through the course of his practice he challenged the gestural abstract painting and the model of the heroic, self-expressive artist championed by that movement.

In his landmark series of Combines (1954–64) he mixed the materials of art making with ordinary things. He considers the text of a newspaper, the detail of photograph, the stitch in a baseball, and the filament in a light bulb as fundamental to the painting as brush stroke or enamel drip of paint, the latter perhaps an ironic nod to Abstract Expressionism.

Readymade artworks and Kinetic Sculpture

Jean Tinguely: life and work (1925–1991) as a creator of kinetic works of art, Jean Tinguely has been counted among the great pioneering artists of the second half of the twentieth century. His kinetic art sculptural machines or metamechanics used recycled materials, as in “parade of machine”¹. At the heart of his work was a preoccupation with the machine and automation. He was interested in how machines work, how they move, and the noises they make. **He is also known for a self-destroying sculpture.**

He collaborated with his wife, Niki de Saint Phalle on projects, such as Le Cyclop¹.



Le Cyclop, 22.5. m tall made of recycled materials



Tinguely's parade of Machines- Le Transport, the beginning of 1960. Made of all sorts of scrap metal to make large, rust brown bicycles, pans and baby carriages.

Readymade from Object to Self

In 1998, Tracey Emin's sculpture *My Bed*¹ was actually the artist's⁴ own freshly slept-in bed, with crumpled pillows, disheveled sheets, and dirty tissues and other junks (including sanitary items, prophylactics, and liquor bottles) strewn around the footboard. *My Bed* brings new meanings to “readymade” and how it is deployed to become art. It is the kind of “artwork” “that moves the viewer from the anxieties of WWII to the life of single women in urban societies.



Readymade Objects-The Socioeconomic Context

Ready-made objects originated in the context of the discovery of the “machine” that enabled man to enter the industrial age. Technological and Industrial developments made it an important element in commerce. At the same time, it helped Humanity and led to the creation of a civilized society. However, this was associated with encouraging “consumption” that quickly became related to capitalist economy and private interests, which contributed to the creation of consumer societies that brought about great changes in cultural and political life. To achieve these goals, pre-fabricated objects were provided with many characteristics to attract consumers in contemporary societies. Over time consumerism of ready-made things assumed great importance in culture and society.

Brown, Neal (1 November 2006). *Tate Modern Artists: Tracey Emin*. Harry N. Abrams. p. 28. [ISBN 9781854375421](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/9781854375421).

Readymade art and the human condition

From the self to the human condition in general, Readymade are not to be missed. In his three-dimensional sculptural work, Dario Tironi¹ in 2016, created what he called a monument to mankind. This sculpture is constructed entirely from scrap parts. It is inspired by the idea of a monument as a commemoration of important historical figures or heroic conquests. This seems to be the current condition of modern man. A weary and defenseless figure stands atop of a mountain of rubbish, whilst also accentuating the tragic idea that Man strives to elevate himself to a higher social status by accumulating wealth (garbage?). The



monumental size of this piece, reminds us of the huge amount of garbage that is produced every single day. Is there dignity in garbage? Compared with the statues of heroic figures from the classical world, has humanity sunk to the use of scraps from garbage than Carrara marble?

Another commentary on the human condition is provided by Khalil Chishtee¹

who is a sculptor creating human form from discarded plastic bags. His works often express the feelings of misery, sorrow and dejection. Layers of meanings are expressed by his use of items that are used once and then discarded. His artwork also speaks of contemporary society and the waste is produced as a result of consumerism.



Using shredded, bunched, bundled, and knotted plastic bags, Khalil Chishtee creates evocative figural sculptures imbued with emotional tension. Though he sometimes uses tables, chairs, or other objects as the armature for his more extensive installations, Chishtee mostly works only with the bags themselves, constructing his sculptures by artfully manipulating the plastic as if he were working with clay. “Trash bags feel like clay in my fingers,” he says. “No adhesive or thread is ever used to construct the sculptures.” As in *Your Success, My Failure* (2007), Chishtee’s figures are often shown in the midst of fraught narratives that refer to the pain and pleasure of love. In this work, a woman walks precariously across a tightrope, while a man gazes up at her, ready to protect her if she falls.

Readymade artworks and the Environment¹

Rob Mulholland is a sculptor and environmental artist. His practice explores the complex relationship between humans and the natural world. Utilizing a wide variety of forms and materials, his sculpture installations interact with their surroundings. He incorporates mirrored surfaces in his sculptures to reflect the given environment and alter the viewers' perception of the space. The reflection is purposely distorted inviting the viewer to question their individual relationship with their surroundings. He is interested in kinetic forces. His sculptures push the boundaries of physical structural engineering allowing him to explore and develop his practice further. His work is both gallery based and sited in public spaces. He creates eerie mirrored sculptures out of Perspex, a kind of acrylic glass. The pieces create the uncanny effect of blending into their surroundings, at times appearing almost completely camouflaged and yet jumping out at you suddenly as your perspective shifts around them. Mulholland's largest installation of six figures, [Vestige](#), is currently installed at David Marshall Lodge in Scotland. The artist, via his website:



Ready-made Objects and the theory of globalization:

Globalization has greatly contributed to the expansion of ready-made objects as consumer goods and products, and peoples of the whole world have become a big market.

Globalization in the contemporary sense (Americanization) is not just about control politics and economy, but also about transformation of the cultures of peoples and their national identity. It aims to popularize a model of behavior, values and ways of living imprinted with Western-American culture.

Today, inequality is increasing across the world. What is referred to as globalization is the most recent phase of uneven and combined development. The new clash of hypermodern and traditional forms of economic activity and social life are taking place side by side; megacities spring up alongside the 'planet of slums', and communication technologies play an important role in this clash of space and time.

Recent debates on globalization and art involve a rejection of modernist internationalism; instead, artists and art historians are engaged with local conditions of artistic production and the way these mesh in an international system of global art making.

Drawing local image cultures into the international spaces of modern art as in the works by Rina Banerjee¹ has once more shifted the character of art. The paradox is that the cultural means that are being employed – video art, installation, large color photographs and so forth – seem genuinely international.



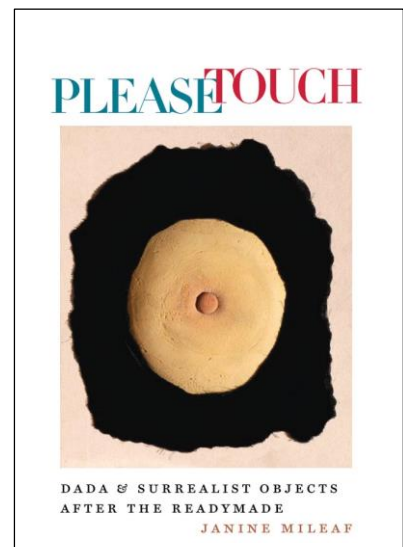
Rina Banerjee. Take me, take me, take me...to the palace of love. 2003.

Courtesy of artist and galerie nathalie obadia, paris/brussels. © rina banerjee. Image courtesy of Pennsylvania academy of the fine arts, Philadelphia/Barbara Katus.

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Readymade and aesthetics

Readymade objects are of aesthetic interest because they pose a dilemma. Is there really an object, a sculpture, that is distinct from its matter? A urinal, which object is created merely by the artist's choice of the urinal? Or are we dealing with a case in which an artist passes off something, a urinal, as if it were a sculpture, even though it is not one? (Ervine 2013). The main issue is that the main thrust of readymade art is not aesthetics but an antithetical statement about aesthetics and art. However, use of paint can enhance the aesthetic appeal of readymade objects as in the use of bright **colors** built upon the freshness of the **ready-made** items (Koskinen et al.2013). Readymade objects also add a new aesthetic dimension through tactile sensations. In his book, Mileaf (2010) "Please Touch" presents a persuasive argument highlighting the role of "tactility," which it defines as a decentralized, fragmented, and intimate form of knowing.



Book cover of "Please Touch"
–Dada and surrealist objects
after the readymade

Results

1. Readymade objects since the 1910s had a great influence on the development of sculpture practices in the 20th century and are still a major element of sculpture today.
2. One of the main developments was the emergence of the concept of three dimensional art, as an art form extending the concept of sculpture beyond the subtraction or addition from raw materials.
3. Starting with found objects at the beginning of the 20th century, standalone readymade objects were chosen to create different kinds of sculpture. Readymade objects were chosen, labelled and installed in museums and galleries individually or with other objects. They were later used to fabricate a three-dimensional artwork.
4. Objects used in readymade sculpture changed, range from ordinary objects from everyday life, discards, garbage and commercial objects bought from stores.
5. Some artists created their three dimensional artworks using paint, photographs, film and other media.
6. One of the main contributions of readymade sculpture was to draw attention to ideas rather than to objects influencing the emergence of conceptual art.
7. The ideas expressed by readymade art in the 20th century were associated with other art movements related to wars in modern times, mechanization and the tensions of modern life. Through time, readymade sculpture was used for self-expression and as a commentary on globalization and the human condition in the 21st century.

Conclusions

Readymade sculpture has been a major influence in the art world since the 1910s. Its emergence marked a new perspective on art highlighting the role of ideas in art. Since its inception readymade art became closely related to the socioeconomic and sociopolitical issues with their impact on how artists viewed themselves and the world. Starting with readymade art, experimentation with different materials, techniques and methods revolutionized the concept of “sculpture” to the extent that three-dimensional art was coined to describe the novel art forms that resemble sculpture only in that they occupy space as three dimensional forms.

Recommendation

Readymade art is here to stay. It has become an important component of modern art beyond sculpture and has the potential to proliferate and to become a medium for further artistic expressions and imagination. Young artists are advised to take stock of the strengths and weaknesses of this genre of art. Readymade art appeared in a western “anti-art” movement, inspired by the impact of consumerism, industrial productivity, machines, discontent with mass culture and conservative social norms. Egyptian artists who wish to explore this art have to re-adapt it to the Egyptian sensibilities and social issues to escape the trap of blind imitation.

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Dario Tironi. 2016. Mixed-media assembly, cm 200x200x320. Piazza del Duomo, Pietrasanta(IT). <https://dariatironi.com/>

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<http://www.artnowpakistan.com/khalil-chishtee/>

¹ <http://robmulholland.org/> ⁷

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/claytonpress/2019/01/08/rina-banerjee-make-me-a-summary-of-the-world-at-pennsylvania-academy-of-the-fine-arts/#3944e0d73443>