

The hundredth anniversary of the readymade, Marcel Duchamp's name for the common manufactured objects that he converted into works of art by choosing and inscribing them, was celebrated on January 15th at the Museum of Modern Art. About forty invited guests met in a gallery of paintings by Duchamp, Picabia, Man Ray, and other contemporaries, where they were outnumbered by swarms of uninvited visitors—it was Free Friday, with no admission charge after 4 P.M. Ann Temkin, the museum's chief curator of painting and sculpture, welcomed everyone in her brief remarks. Standing near Duchamp's bicycle wheel mounted on a kitchen stool ("Bicycle Wheel"), and under his snow shovel hanging from a wire ("In Advance of the Broken Arm"), Temkin recalled the letter that Duchamp had written from New York in mid-January, 1916, to his sister Suzanne, in Paris, describing these endlessly subversive art works and identifying them, for the first time, with the English word "readymades." Duchamp told her to go to his old studio, on the Rue Saint-Hippolyte, where she would find a galvanized-iron bottle rack; he wanted her to paint a title on the bottom in silver-white paint, and to sign it "(d'après) Marcel Duchamp," thereby creating an original readymade at a distance. The title he wanted her to paint is missing from the letter, and afterward Duchamp couldn't remember what it was, but in any case Suzanne couldn't do what he asked. She had already cleaned out the studio and thrown away everything in it, including the bottle rack.

The celebrants at MOMA included Duchamp descendants, family friends, artists, art historians, and Duchampians of all ages. After Temkin spoke, she rounded them up and led the way to a room on the floor below. Champagne was served, and there was a large cake from Empire Cake, in Chelsea, with a replica of "Bicycle Wheel" in beige and silver frosting. Francis M. Naumann, whose many books on Duchamp include a volume of his letters, talked about discovering the 1916 letter from the artist to his sister. Suzanne had married Jean Crotti, an artist friend of Duchamp's, and some of their descendants had moved to the U.S. Naumann's search for Duchamp's letters led him to Alice Buckles Brown, a grand-niece of the Crottis, who lived in Piedmont, California, and was described to him as being "a little strange." Naumann went to see her, and she brought out a bunch of letters for him to look at. "She told me she was going out for twenty minutes, and during that time I read the letter to Suzanne," he said. "You can imagine how I felt, just holding it. When she came back, she said that I could make photocopies of everything. I told her she could give the originals to the Archives of American Art, and get a tax deduction. Not long afterward, I heard that she had mailed them all to the Archives, without an appraisal, in an envelope that was not registered or insured. My impression was that she couldn't have cared less about the tax deduction."

A technician who had been fiddling with a computer-TV hookup called for silence. The screen showed Antoine Monnier, the director of the Association Marcel Duchamp, celebrating the readymade anniversary with a group of people on the roof of the B.H.V. department store, in Paris. B.H.V. stands for Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville, where Duchamp bought the bottle rack he asked Suzanne to sign. The store still sells bottle racks, with rows of protruding pegs to hold drying wine bottles, but these

days they're plastic. It was close to midnight in Paris, so the store was closed, but its rooftop bar was open to the public.

Thierry de Duve, a philosopher and art historian who lives in New York, came to the MOMA party wearing a distinctly blue sweater—French blue. De Duve believes that the message of the readymade has been misunderstood. “It was decoded to mean that when anything can be art anybody can be an artist,” he explained. “But it’s the other way around. When anybody can be an artist, *then* anything can be art. I have learned to look on Duchamp as the messenger of a sea change in art. He switched us away from the Beaux-Arts model.”

In the letter to Suzanne, Duchamp added (in French), “Don’t tear your hair out trying to understand this in the Romantic or Impressionist or Cubist sense—it has nothing to do with all that.” ♦

-Calvin Tomkins

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