

# Unpacking the *Boîte-en-valise*: Playing off Duchampian Deferral and Derrida's "différance"

Assembled between 1935-41, *Boîte-en-valise* (Fig. 1) is a "traveling museum" of 69 works by Duchamp that include *Fountain*, *Large Glass*, *Broyeuse de chocolat*, *Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy*, *Tu m'*, *Paris Air*, *Pliant de voyage*, *3 Stoppages Etalon*, *Bride*, *Comb* (Figs. 2-11), and others. Duchamp's aim was "to reproduce the paintings and the objects [he] liked and collect them in a space as small as possible." But the traveling museum of miniature reproductions performs other things cleverly absent from the 'artist statement' being proffered here. If the readymade is that object which should be "a work without an artist to make it," the objects in the *Boîte-en-valise* upset the concept of the readymade by their quality of being remade readymades. *Fountain* and *Paris Air* are reconstructed as a mini-urinal ironically restored to its upright position, and a mini-ampoule respectively. *Pliant de voyage* is reincarnated as a smaller, stitched version of the original typewriter cover. No longer independent of the artist's manual act of creation, the readymade becomes an anti-readymade, or a made, made by an artist. Is Duchamp contradicting himself? Why does he choose such elaborate methods of physical replication and attention to detail in the production of the miniatures? Why emphasize the unreadymadeness of the readymade?

Perhaps the apparent reversal of the readymade into the made is not really a reversal, but emblematic of a complicated Duchampian exercise. Levi-Strauss' concept of bricolage, as interpreted by Jacques Derrida in his essay, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," can help us

interpret the process:

The *bricoleur*, says Lévi-Strauss, is someone who uses “the means at hand,” that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous—and so forth.” (Derrida, 1970: 231)

Taking the operation of making a readymade as an exemplar of bricolage, what is described here coincides with the idea of the readymade-making artist who uses the means at his disposal which are “already there” and chosen at random – urinals, typewriter covers and the like; trying by “trial and error” to adapt them unhesitatingly and even putting them in combination – adjoining bicycle wheels and stools, for instance, even if their form and origin are heterogenous, trying “several of them at once.” However, it is this unresolved “and so forth” that closes Derrida’s description in a relatively unimportant way, which concentrates the possibilities about this concept of the readymade, which the Boîte-en-Valise sets into motion. Adaptation, change, and heterogeneity are compounded by the pending nature of bricolage, which opens the object up to change “whenever it appears necessary.” Conceptual bricolage serves to underscore the impurity, impermanence and futurity of the gesture of the readymade, marking its place in a larger experiment concerning the nature of the art object and the value we subscribe to it.

If one were to strictly adhere to the readymade as an unmediated, un-created commercial object, this would ironically disqualify most of the readymades—especially the ‘assisted’ and ‘reciprocal’ ones(1), such as *Bicycle Wheel*, *Fountain* and *L.H.O.O.Q.* (Figs. 12, 13 and 14). Evidently, delimiting the readymades inhibits the scope of the possible

Duchampian commentary, for the issue of the readymade's createdness is relatively unimportant, as seen in Duchamp's defense of the readymades in *The Blind Man* (Fig. 15): "Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it" (Ades, 154). Such an approach would ignore the open-ended "operation" and the progressive play of ideas that Duchamp might otherwise be performing through his delightfully self-parodying *Boîte-en-valise*.

Duchamp is himself a portmanteau of artistic associations, like his *Boîte*. His career appears to be a product of random assemblage, exemplifying a proclivity to change and the employing of several styles, materials and artistic allegiances at once; a *bricoleur's* approach to art-making. Witness his abandonment of the "Cubist straitjacket," his flirtations with Dada, Surrealism, science and optics in the form of the *Rotoreliefs* (Fig. 16), his overall refusal to be identified with any of these categories and crowning dissimulation: that of giving up art to play chess. He switched mediums like an adept con artist, using paint, canvas, glass, found objects, verbal play and puns, and finally installation in *Étant-donnés* (Fig. 17). Such heterogeneity, witnessed at the level of the artwork, commits us to investigating the effects of Duchamp's *bricolage* at a theoretical level. By examining the reconstructed miniatures in the *Boîte* against Derrida's (non)concept of *différance*, we can understand the readymade in the light of its place in a modifiable series of comments.

The concept of difference outlined by Saussure refers to how the value of a sign derives from the fact that it is different from adjacent and all other signs. Consequently, *différance* incorporates and reorganizes that, adding that the value of the sign is not immediately present, but is deferred until the next sign in the syntagm appears. *Différance* is not merely an activity, but contains many traces of former and future activities: "What is written as *différance*, then, will be the

playing movement that “produces”—by means of something that is not simply an activity;” “every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to another and to other concepts, by the systematic play of differences. Such a play, then—différance—is no longer simply a concept, but *the possibility of conceptuality*, of the conceptual system and process in general” (449). Thus, indeterminacy and intervals are inscribed into the word itself; ‘différance’ performs what it is a trace of. But this indeterminacy between passive and active signification by the sign does not condemn itself, but provides the possibility of conceptuality.

In the same way, the value of an artwork derives from the fact that it is different from “adjacent and all other artworks.” In order to gain meaning, readymades occurring in new incarnations must differ from their predecessors. The readymades are therefore an erratic experiment, whose practical outcomes as conceptual pieces were deferred as Duchamp’s career, progressed, disarming static habits of interpretation. As different signs in the syntagm, *Fountain*, *Comb*, etc, were reincarnated *twice*: as 1964’s full-size replicas(2) of the lost originals, and as the three diminutive 1936-41 replicas that we find in *Boîte-en-valise*. **(Figs. 18 and 19)** Different permutations of the original ‘sign,’ they modified their values as sign-objects, reminding us that the readymades are not conceptually pure, but instead produce effects that emerge from their internal differences.

If so, *Boîte-en-valise*, as a “traveling museum” assembling 69 ‘seminal’ works, expands the debate about what takes on the value of art by the sheer diversity of its content and heterogenous forms. If *différance* means that the value of the sign is not immediately present, but is deferred until the next sign in the syntagm, then *Boîte* is the sum of all the successive signs of the works that came before. If *différance* “contains many traces of former and future activities,” it is also a composite of contesting signs and signifiers, of works

and their statements, catalogued within *Boîte* in a self-conscious genre-forming gesture. As archive, it invites Duchamp's immortalization as a producer of fine art, and as an act of formal shrinkage, participates in Duchamp's own self-devaluation. It is an ingenious stunt, inviting one to partake in a nostalgic vision of his career through self-citation, and interrupting the act of nostalgia at the same time.

*Boîte* traces the previous terms in the syntagm that precede it. As a container of signs, it contains not only the Fountain, but also little replicas of paintings, which was the very form he renounced before producing the readymades. An internal logic of contradiction exists in Duchamp's self-citation, maintaining a multiplicity of active and passive voices, valorizations and disavowals. In the work, he references, quotes and contradicts himself. One imagines the pre-Tu m' paintings (Fig. 20) competing with the post-Tu m' readymades, the readymades quarrelling within themselves; the *Three Standard Stoppages* (Fig. 21) proposing theories of chance; the urinal, reversed to its normal vertical position, poised in a state of self-doubt. As a contestation ground between these works, it also engages in its own art-historical project. The museum contains collotypes of *Bride*, *Nine Malic Moulds* (Fig. 22) and prints like Man Ray's *Dust Breeding* (a picture showing dust collecting on his studio floor, which becomes immortalized in the *Sieves*), (Fig. 23) and so on, all of which are cast members of the eventual production of the Large Glass. These working models mirror their final image in the painting, and in a playful gesture of historiography, even the cracks which emerged from the "chance completion" of its shattering in 1927 are faithfully replicated. Another example of this archival fever is Tu m', which is itself an "anthology" of three readymades, *Bicycle Wheel*, *Hat Rack and a corkscrew* that was not 'realized' as a readymade (Figs. 24, 25 and 26). These are represented in the painting by their shadows, cast upon the canvas using a projector and subsequently traced by hand (Ades, 173).

Oppositional conversations co-exist with statements-within-statements, similar to the concentric circles of indeterminacy that orbit around the Marcel Duchamp/Rose Sélavy riddle. Which is the authentic, original art piece? Multiplying these exercises of multiplication, the *Boîte* itself was remade several times, and different versions exist. More than a refutation of an earlier thesis, Duchamp gives us an ever self-multiplying hypertrophy of artistic commentary. Far more than a simple locution, it is a polyvocal, polyfocal work; a composite of mutually-interacting and conversing miniaturized manifestoes that participate in a freeplay of meanings. As its own field of contestation, *Boîte* seems to also mock the art world's endgames of theoretical one-up-man-ship by presenting a "playing movement" of concepts in this dizzying scheme of solipsistic intertextuality. It never allows "yes" or "no." Hence his "a-art," or "an-art" (Ades, 133), a term which denies the possibilities that something is either art, or not.

Is this *différance* at work? Does one's inability to get a grip on Duchamp catch us at the moment of our desires for theoretical arrest? Perhaps Duchamp's artistic statement is the very disinterest in articulating one, but providing the possibility of conceptuality through slippage and changeability in meaning. Duchamp's games demonstrate the playing movement of *différance*:

[...] that which lets itself be designated *différance* is neither simply active nor simply passive, announcing or rather recalling something like, the middle voice, saying an operation that is not an operation, an operation that cannot be conceived either as passion or as the action of a subject on an object, or on the basis of the categories of agent or patient, neither on the basis of nor moving toward any of these terms. For the middle voice, a certain nontransitivity, may be what philosophy, at its outset, distributed into an active and a passive voice, thereby constituting itself by means of this repression. (Derrida, 1982: 11)

What is written as *différance*, then, will be the playing movement that “produces”—by means of something that is not simply an activity—these differences, these effects of difference.

(Derrida, 1982: 13)

There is neither active nor a passive in the operation of self-referencing and self-refutation collected within *Boîte*. As another sign in the syntagm, the work confounds “repressive” attempts at epistemological equilibrium. As the overall gesture of the “and so forth” means that the value of any sign is not immediately present, but open to augmentation by future permutations, then this is true to the extent that Duchamp’s art still ‘operates’ today, distributing into “active and passive voices,” which contemporary criticism on Duchamp can be then said to prolong. The “playing movement” never really “produces;” it is an activity that is not simply an activity, an operation that is not an operation, by a man whose position is that of not taking a position, revealing the dominance of oppositional thinking in Western thought.

This sort of delay and deference results in the kind of freeplay which Derrida outlines as a way to interpret interpretation, which has bearings on art-historical interpretation as well. His work is the preparation for a performance and a meeting that will be; a moment that is to come. The work is not simply the work in its totality, but sets up the conditions for the deferred event, rather than prescribes it. As we see in the ‘Specifications for “Readymades”’ in *The Green Box*, **(Fig. 27)**

*by planning for a moment to come, [...] to inscribe a readymade – The readymade can later be looked for. – (with all kinds of delays)*

*The important thing then is just this matter of timing, this snapshot effect, like a speech delivered on no matter what occasion but at such and such an hour. It is a kind of rendezvous.*

(Ades, 155)

What is art is always deferred. The object waits for its own inscription, which occurs in a "snapshot" rendezvous. It is only a plan. In this sense, *Boîte*, with its conflicting theses, becomes many readymades, which exist independent of the manipulation of the artist, and whose effects hereafter are enacted in eternal exodus from him.

Let us examine how the act of assigning meaning is not prescribed but deferred. First, the title of the *Boîte* itself is a bewildering fragment – "*Of or by Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy*"—that contains statements within a statement, delving us in semiotic freeplay. "Of" indicates belonging—the *Boîte* is the traveling exhibition or personal shrine, primarily finding its meaning as an object belonging to Duchamp or Sélavy. It reinforces the concept of the readymade as a commodity object independent of artistic creation. Alternatively, "by" emphasizes authorship and creation, where the object's existence is conditional to its maker. This could be an ironic reinstatement of the artist as creator, a gesture set up against a whole career of refuting the auteur-ship creed. However, the possibility of final statement is subsumed within another circle of indeterminacy created by the "or" which adds a further qualification or question—Is it Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy who owns or created the work? Secondly, the *Boîte* also collects numerous verbal puns of his career, and puns are another site of interacting and limitless passive and active voices—meaning that is 'waiting to occur.' *Large Glass* performs *différance* constantly by way of its transparent glass 'canvas,' taking on the status of a new work with each locale it is placed within, such as in Katherine Dreier's library, in his studio, galleries, museums etc. In 1920, he declared *Large Glass* "definitively unfinished." The transparency demonstrates deferral in action because it has no "fixed locus," but is instead of "function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions [come] into play." (Derrida,



1970: 225). His work reveals the innate conditionality of signs and gestures where value and meaning are always subject to and parasitical upon its immediate circumstances.

Finally, the concept of the 'inframince,' or 'infra-thin' demonstrates a new kind of impossible thought which brings the work of art to the realm of speculation and conceptuality. It is described several ways—as a 'below-thin'; as the "interval between two identicals" (Ades, 184); as a trace that is not necessarily an index but "a kind of interface or state of being 'inbetween'" (Ades, 183) and which can be applied as "allegory," pointing to the separation between the signifier and signified. Duchamp avoids teleology and the "repression" of what has developed in Western philosophy into the binaries of active and passive voices, gestures which are 'agent' and 'patient.' In his work we encounter positions that are not positions, locutions that are not locutions and operation that are not operations, demonstrative of Derrida's statement, "the center is not the center" (1982: 224). We see readymades that are not readymades per se, and a nostalgic anthology that is not merely a nostalgic anthology but a paradox of manually reproduced replicas of mass-reproduced objects, put into traveling albums which are themselves reproduced in different versions. In this serial scheme of infinite regression, conditionality and claim both coexist in infinite interplay and inter-information:

[...] every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. Such a play, *différance*, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general. (1982: 13)

The *inframince*, readymades and *Boîte* exist in a space of the imagination. Just as the *Large Glass* exists within the intersections between texts of the *Green Box* and the viewer's interpretations, his works are always in a potential state of

becoming, adhering to the logic of punning, which generates many meanings in the hands of the interpreter, of which Duchamp was so fond.

At cross-positions, Duchamp and Derrida inquire into our conceptual processes and habits. The Boîte-en-valise demands of us the ability to consider that a sign—whether a word or a readymade—can mean perform many things at the same time. By playing on absence and presence, patient and agent, active and passive, Duchamp's work reinforces conditions of indeterminacy that will come to define the postmodern experience of art and representation. This condition, however, does not simply implode on itself, but through a "systematic play of differences" which refers to "the other" (one opposite) or "other concepts" (many opposites), produces "the possibility [...] of a conceptual process in general." Large Glass, Tu m', the Boîte, etc. all set up the conditions for such an event, which must always exist in the future. Duchamp prizes conceptual process over static artworks, which reflects in the ability of his work to generate debate to this moment. Given that Marcel Duchamp's plural claims and practice seem to presage the politics of postmodern representation, it is "no historical accident" that he should have been rehabilitated as the godfather of 1960s postmodernism (Huysen, 119).

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## NOTES

1. 'Assisted' readymades refer to found objects altered by the artist, such as the altered Mona Lisa in L.H.O.O.Q.. Other assisted readymades, such as In Advance Of The Broken Arm (**Fig. 28**) and Fountain, see the utilitarian object taking on the status of art. 'Reciprocal' readymades refer to the reverse?the work of art taking on mundane, utilitarian role, such as a Rembrandt painting being used as an ironing board, as Duchamp suggested.

2. The originals of Bicycle Wheel (1913), Fountain (1917), Hat Rack (1917), Pliant de voyage (1919), etc. were lost and re-enacted in 1964 versions. Similarly, In Advance of a Broken Arm (1915) was remade in 1945.

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Figs. 1~28

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