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## Window Shopping with Duchamp: Commodity Aesthetics Delayed in Glass

### Abstract

While Marcel Duchamp's readymades are consistently framed as a challenge to the art world and the concept of art itself, they also challenge the world from which they were taken, the world of commodities. Readymades subject the commodity to the world of aesthetics in order to more fully investigate the commodity aesthetics of both the commodity form itself and its presentation in shop window displays. This critical investigation complicates the role of commodity aesthetics and consumption as well as their formation of the consumer-subject in Fordist capitalism. The readymade can be seen both as an important forerunner to the theories of commodity aesthetics and consumption in the 1960s and 70s as well as as exemplary of contemporaneous Dadaist praxis.

### Keywords

Duchamp, readymades, commodity aesthetics, shop window, Dada

Window Shopping with Duchamp: Commodity Aesthetics, Delayed in Glass

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In the inaugural chapter of *Capital*, Karl Marx attempts to make sense of the commodity: “A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (81). While Marx’s analyses may have uncovered or explicated elements of the commodity’s metaphysical and theological mysteries, it would be another hundred years before the complexities of a commodity’s aesthetics would receive focused investigations of their own, perhaps most notably in Wolfgang Haug’s *Kritik der Warenästhetik (Critique of Commodity Aesthetics)*, Jean Baudrillard’s *La société du consommation (The Consumer Society)*, and other works of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Haug, who coined the term in his analysis of Fordism, sees modern commodity aesthetics not as a making-sensible of the commodity’s use value, but rather, after the advent of mass production, as a “vom Tauschwert her funktionell bestimmten Komplex dinglicher Erscheinungen” (*Kritik* 22) ‘complex which springs from the commodity form of the products and which is functionally determined by exchange-value’ (*Critique* 7). In this switch, the aesthetics of the commodity form and its presentation becomes uniquely focused on the realization of exchange value, on purchase, on consumption. The critiques of this reorientation of commodity aesthetics after mass production were not only prefigured but also performatively subverted in the peculiar fusion of commodity and aesthetics of Marcel Duchamp’s readymades.

Art historical criticism has almost exclusively viewed the readymades created by Duchamp as radical attacks on artistic production, high aesthetics, and the world of art. This is particularly true of 1917’s infamously bathetic and scatological *Fountain*, likely a collaboration between Duchamp and the Baroness Elsa von Feytag-Loringhoven (see Gammel 220-28). In its defense Beatrice Wood wrote in the pages of the second issue of *The Blind Man*, with input from Duchamp and Walter Arensburg: “They say any artist paying six dollars may exhibit. Mr. Richard Mutt sent in a fountain [urinal] . . . Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it” (5). Much of this definition was soon ossified in André Breton’s assertion that readymades were “objets manufacturés promus à la dignité d’objets d’art par le choix de l’artiste” (“Phare” 46) ‘manufactured objects promoted to the dignity of art objects through the choice of the artist.’ Indeed, Duchamp himself would repeat this formulation three years later in Breton and Paul Éluard’s *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* ‘Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism.’ Duchamp writes: “READYMADE – Objet

usuel promu à la dignité d'objet d'art par le simple choix de l'artiste" (23) 'READYMADE – an ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist.' Art historians have largely adhered to these definitions by Wood, Breton, Duchamp himself, and others, definitions that focus on the investigation of the "dignity of art objects," their production through "choice," and their eventual placement in artistic collections. While more recent criticism has begun to contextualize ready-made objects within the world of commodity capitalism in the first decades of the twentieth century, particularly Molly Nesbit's "Ready-Made Originals: The Duchamp Model" and Helen Molesworth's "Rose Sélavy Goes Shopping," the commodity-objects continue to be framed as critiques of and challenges to art.<sup>1</sup> Consistently ignored, however, is the critical potential of the readymade to expand the art world's high aesthetics beyond the gallery and museum in order to critique and subvert the mass-produced commodity, the consumer capitalist world from which it was excised, and their aesthetics.

Though readymades are rarely subtle in their allusions to the commodity world from which they are purchased, the relationship between readymade and commodity, art and capitalism is significantly more complex. *Fountain's* signature, "R. Mutt / 1917," alludes to J.L. Mott Iron Works, the commodity's manufacturer and supplier that ran a Manhattan plumbing supply store from which it was chosen, "a fixture you see every day in plumbers' show windows" (*Blind Man* 5). 1916's *Comb* is more explicit; a dog-grooming comb stamped like a business card by the manufacturer: "CHAS F. BINGLER / 166 6TH AVE. N.Y." Duchamp, however, hinted at the complexities of the readymade's relationship to the commodity with his second addition to Breton and Éluard's dictionary: "Ready-made réciproque: se servir d'un Rembrandt comme planche à repasser" (23) 'Reciprocal readymade: use a Rembrandt as an ironing board.' Generalized, Duchamp's definition appears a simple reversal: the reciprocal readymade as a work of art demoted to a utilitarian commodity. In actuality, however, complexities abound. In 1919, Duchamp purchased a keepsake postcard of the *Mona Lisa*, recently popularized after its return to the Louvre, for a readymade, which he would "rectify" with a mustache, goatee, and the inclusion of its title, *L.H.O.O.Q.*: art to commodity to readymade to art.<sup>2</sup> Francis Picabia's authorized reproduction for the March 1920 issue of his journal *391*, forgetting the goatee, returned *L.H.O.O.Q.* to the realm of commodities. Duchamp repeated this gesture in 1955 with *L'envers de la peinture* (*The Reverse [or Wrong Side] of Painting*), a dishcloth with Duchamp's original *L.H.O.O.Q.* reproduced on it. In 1965, Duchamp purchased two packs of playing

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<sup>1</sup> See also Theiry de Duve's *Nominalisme Pictural* and "Marcel Duchamp ou le *phynancier* de la vie moderne."

<sup>2</sup> Duchamp created something of a taxonomy of his readymades, including readymades, assisted readymades, rectified readymades, corrected readymades and reciprocal readymades. *L.H.O.O.Q.* is considered a "rectified readymade" because the object has been marked by Duchamp.

cards with the *Mona Lisa* reproduced on the back, pasted them to dinner invitations without alteration and titled them *rasée L.H.O.O.Q.* (*L.H.O.O.Q. Shaved*): a commodified work of art, chosen and rectified as a readymade, therefore promoted in turn to an art object, commodified as (artistic?) journal cover and washcloth, chosen again as readymade from a (commodified?) work of art or (artistic?) commodity. That is, the readymade is neither unidirectional, a transformation from commodity into art, nor uniformly bidirectional, a series of oscillations between the two, but rather a radical complication of them to the point of their inseparability.

These complexities of the object-commodity as readymade are exacerbated by the eventual entanglement of the utilitarian and aesthetic object, but are cast from the first moment of the readymade's production, its being chosen, its purchase. Helen Molesworth notes: "it is precisely this quintessentially twentieth-century experience of shopping that Duchamp introduced into the realm of art" (174). New York department stores confronted shoppers with an overabundance of possibilities at the dawn of mass consumption, "largely dependent on the activity of choice" (174). Duchamp, however, viewed the purchase-as-choice of readymades very differently than the average shopper: "Il faut parvenir à quelque chose d'une indifférence telle que vous n'avez pas d'émotion esthétique. Le choix des ready-mades est toujours basé sur l'indifférence visuelle en même temps que sur l'absence totale de bon ou mauvais goût" (Cabanne 84) 'You have to approach something with an indifference, as if you had no aesthetic emotion. The choice of readymades is always based on visual indifference and, at the same time, on the total absence of good or bad taste.' Just as the average New York shopper must work to determine which commodity they aesthetically prefer and therefore which to acquire, the radical indifference to aesthetic taste plays an outsized role in Duchamp the shopper's purchase-as-choice of the readymade. The totality of this indifference, the exhaustive aesthetic catalogue that encompasses the entirety of good and bad taste to be avoided, would of course be impossible, and if it weren't, no commodities could survive its exclusions. This impossible, theoretical commodity would function as an aesthetic *tabula rasa*. This aggressive indifference was constitutive of Duchamp's choice-as-creation: "I am against the word 'anti' because . . . an anti-artist is just as much of an artist as the other artist. Anartist would have been better. . . . Anartist meaning no artist at all" (Hopkins 255). Rather than a non- or anti-aesthetic commodity, the readymade is meant, if only theoretically, to be an-aesthetic, an absence of stimulation, of feeling, of sensation, and indeed of sense itself. This attempted an-aesthetic an-sense extended to the second element of the readymade's production, its inscription.

Though less conspicuous than that of choice, inscription likewise complicates the relation between readymade and commodity. If the an-aesthetic commodity as readymade is the object as blank canvas, its inscription is "une couleur qui n'était pas sortie d'un tube . . . , une phrase qui, elle aussi, devait être d'essence

poétique et souvent sans sens normal, arrivant à jouer avec des mots” (Charbonnier 62) ‘a color that didn’t come from a tube . . . , a sentence which was to be essentially poetic and often without normal meaning, managing to play with words.’<sup>3</sup> Here, the roles appear reversed. This is an aesthetic, described as color and poetry, that has not been prepared, that does not come from a tube, has been neither commodified nor purchased, an an-commodity. The inscription further avoids any potential commodification in its attempt to avoid meaning itself, to be an-hermeneutic and an-sensical. Just as Duchamp supposedly spent weeks with an object to determine whether it was in fact aesthetic (Cabanne 83-84), he would experiment with texts to remove meaning. Speaking about two of his textual works, *The* (October 1915) and *Rendez-vous du Dimanche 6 Février 1916 / à 1h. 3/4 après midi (Rendez-vous of Tuesday the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 1916 / at 1:45pm)*, Duchamp said: “The meaning in these sentences was a thing I [Duchamp] had to avoid. . . . the minute I *did* think of a verb to add to the subject, I would very often see a meaning and immediately . . . cross out the verb and change it . . . until the text finally read without an echo of the physical world” (Schwarz 638). These textual works would go on to inform the inscriptions of two of his readymades, *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (November 1915) and *Comb* (17 February 1916), respectively.<sup>4</sup> If the inscription is meant to be an-sensical, with no echo of the physical world, there would also, necessarily, be no echo of the consumer capitalism that had begun to dominate it. Duchamp imagines the successful readymade as a separated juxtaposition of an an-aesthetic commodity and an an-commodity aesthetic, inscribed, but not influential.

The impossibility of choosing a truly an-aesthetic commodity is mirrored in the impossibility of inscribing an an-commodity aesthetic, the combination of which challenges the possibility of a successful readymade as such. Looking back at the inscription of his first inscribed readymade that doubled as its title, *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, Duchamp laments, for example: “Évidemment, j’espérais que cela n’avais pas de sens mais, au fond, tout finit par en avoir un” (Cabanne 96) ‘Obviously I was hoping it was without sense but, deep down, everything ends up having some.’<sup>5</sup> The failure is, however, not only linguistic but

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<sup>3</sup> Duchamp regularly conflated painting and the readymade: “Since the tubes of paint used by the artists are manufactured and ready-made products we must conclude that all paintings in the world are ‘readymades aided’ and also assemblages” (*Essential Writings* 142). See Thierry de Duve’s *Kant after Duchamp*, especially the third chapter, “The Readymade and the Tube of Paint.”

<sup>4</sup> For complete texts of both *The* and *Rendez-vous*, as well discussions of their similar production, see Schwarz 638 and 642, respectively. For various interpretations of *Comb*’s inscription, often in connection with other works by Duchamp, see Schwarz 195, Jones 139-40, Moffitt 231, or Ramirez 39-40.

<sup>5</sup> *The* and *Broken Arm* are regularly considered together in Duchamp criticism for the short time between their creations and their linguistic similarities as an-sensical texts in English. *Broken Arm* is controversially the first inscribed, i.e. fully complete, readymade. Schwarz suggests that *Pulled*

more specifically locational: “Évidemment l’association est facile [quand on a l’objet sous les yeux]: on peut se casser le bras en pelletant la neige” (Cabanne 96-97) ‘Obviously the association is easy [when you have the object in front of your eyes]: you can break your arm shoveling snow.’ Though Molly Nesbit notes that “[t]his shovel will never be used, bent, rusted, or fall obsolete,” this has not “effectively silenced” the commodity (62).<sup>6</sup> Rather, the shovel has merely been given a new narrative of use, a new sense. This, however, is precisely what Duchamp wished to avoid with the non-intersection of an an-aesthetic object-commodity and an-commodity aesthetic-inscription. Failure occurs with the evident association of sense with a commodity: when language makes the use of the commodity sensible, when the desired non-intersectional juxtaposition becomes amalgamation, when the commodity becomes re-aestheticized. This, of course, is precisely where commodity aesthetics occurs according to Haug: “einerseits auf ‘Schönheit,’ d.h. auf eine sinnliche Erscheinung, die auf die Sinne ansprechend wirkt; andererseits auf solche Schönheit, wie sie im Dienste der Tauschwertrealisierung entwickelt und den Waren aufgeprägt worden ist” (*Kritik* 23) ‘on the one hand to “beauty,” i.e. an appearance which appeals to the senses; and, on the other hand, to a beauty developed in the service of the realization of exchange value and has been imprinted on the commodity.’<sup>7</sup> Failure in any one of these various moments of the readymade—the an-aesthetic commodity, the an-commodity aesthetic, and their non-intersectional juxtaposition—constitutes a failed readymade, a seemingly inevitable failure.

Duchamp, oddly, appeared to be perfectly at ease with the seemingly inevitable failures of readymades in the face of commodity aesthetics. This ease was not merely evident as a kind of exhausted resignation by the Duchamp of the 1960s, who made profitable replicas of the readymades with Arturo Schwarz and had therefore “long since abandoned the problem of the Duchamp of the teens” (Molesworth 173), but was evident already in 1922 as Duchamp took his final pseudonym, created by Robert Desnos: “Marchand du sel” (15) ‘merchant of salt.’ This phonetic anagram of “Marcel Duchamp” associates him with that exceedingly common commodity as white as the blank canvas that the an-aesthetic commodity of the readymade purports to be. As pointed out by Schwarz, this pseudonym also homophonically alludes to Duchamp as a merchant of *scel*, Old French for ‘signature,’ ‘stamp,’ or ‘sigil.’ In New York at the beginning of the twentieth

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at *Four Pins* was his first (189). In their discussion, Duchamp agrees with Cabanne that *Broken Arm* was first (96).

<sup>6</sup> Ironically, at a retrospective of Duchamp’s work (as well as his brothers’) in Minnesota in the 1940s, a janitor “mistook it [an authorized replica of *Broken Arm*] for a shovel, as well he might, and went to work on a snowdrift” (Hamilton 30).

<sup>7</sup> My translation. The published translation does not include the clause that references the imprinting of the commodity. See *Critique* 8.

century, *scel* could just as easily be translated as ‘trademark,’ the aesthetic slogan or logo of a commodity.<sup>8</sup> Less a merchant of his own auratic signature, Duchamp “fray[s] the logic of the trademark [and] render[s] his readymades authentically nonauthentic” (Molesworth 181). A viewer of Duchamp’s *Fountain* may not notice the stamp of the urinal’s manufacturer, J.L. Mott, but rather Duchamp’s “R. Mutt,” nor would they find the trademarked name of some prestigious shovel maker that actually manufactured *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, but rather Duchamp’s inscription-as-title. This *scel*-trademark inscription never deletes the original trademark, nor does Duchamp the merchant appear interested in foregoing the trademark altogether, but rather in “fraying” it, problematizing it, making it conspicuous, and therefore highlighting it. That is, both the trademark merchant and his readymades appear to consistently and willfully fall short of their own descriptions and aspirations: an-artist, an-aesthetic, or an-commodity. The readymade, then, can be seen not merely as a critique of aesthetics or the commodity, but also as a productive failure of the readymade’s own proposed an-aesthetic an-commodity, a subversive performance and performative subversion of commodity aesthetics and the mass consumption it induces.

Perhaps the most productive failure was in fact an actual failure. In the final collection of Duchamp’s notes published before his death, *À l’infinif (La boîte blanche)* ‘In the Infinitive (The White Box),’ Duchamp included a small note dated January 1916, as he began to experiment with an-sensical inscription: “trouver inscription pour Woolworth Bldg. / comme readymade–” (*Duchamp du signe* 112, hereafter *DDS*) ‘find inscription for Woolworth Bldg. / as readymade–.’<sup>9</sup> He never did and the Woolworth Building never became a readymade. It was, however, an exceptional object to choose for fabrication as a readymade—a fifty-seven-floor, 792-foot piece of Neo-Gothic architecture, the tallest building in the world at the time. Far from the supposed an-aesthetic commodities chosen for other readymades, the Woolworth Building was commodity aesthetics materialized. Looming over the Manhattan terminus of the Brooklyn Bridge, over which millions of potential consumers from the outer borough would cross, the Woolworth Building functioned as the initial aesthetic presentation of the myriad commodities it housed, architecture as advertisement in itself, “a giant signboard” (Fenske 25). Duchamp chose the very epicenter of modern commodity capitalism, the “Cathedral of Commerce,” the headquarters and crown jewel of the most successful retail corporation in the world, a corporation whose namesake founder and executive recognized and revolutionized the importance of the theatrical

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<sup>8</sup> As Molesworth notes, the trademark was created in its current form in the United States in 1905, a mere seventeen years before Duchamp began to call himself a merchant.

<sup>9</sup> This note is dated between *The* of October 1915 and *Rendez-vous* of February 1916.

commodity aesthetics of shop windows and store fronts.<sup>10</sup> Woolworth “had already earned a reputation for enticing window design,” employing “the latest technologies in plate glass manufacturing, along with mirrors and the new incandescent illumination to heighten the viewers’ experience of the shop windows’ allure” (Fenske 27).<sup>11</sup> Though Duchamp was unable to find a suitable inscription for the Woolworth Building, its choice not as a commodity itself, but rather as an object that aesthetically displayed commodities to potential consumers through the theatrical framework of its shop windows and store fronts extends the concept of the readymade and its interaction with commodity aesthetics beyond the commodity’s material form to include consumer capitalism itself.

The theatrical presentation of aestheticized commodities within the shop window, the very antithesis or at very least the apparent focus of critique for the an-aesthetic an-commodity readymade, was in fact fundamental to the readymade project from the beginning. Over the winter holidays of 1912-13, Duchamp revisited a scene that had long interested him: a chocolate grinder behind the shop window of a Rouen confectionary (Tompkins 122-24). By March 1913, Duchamp would represent the scene with his *Broyeuse de chocolat no. 1* (*Chocolate Grinder no. 1*) in a “utilitarian mode of representation” (Nesbit 60). This proved a watershed moment for Duchamp: “c’est à partir de là que j’ai pensé pouvoir éviter tout contact avec la tradition peinture-picturale” (Cabanne 63) ‘it was there I began to think I could avoid all contact with traditional pictorial painting.’ That is to say, this was the first step away from past aesthetics, towards a detached, dry, objective an-aesthetics.<sup>12</sup> To complete the work, however, required a proto-inscription: “formule commerciale, marque de fabrique, devise commerciale / inscrite comme une réclamation sur un petit papier glacé et / coloré (faire exécuter dans une imprimerie) – ce papier collé / à l’article: ‘Broyeuse de Chocolat’” (DDS 148) ‘commercial formula, trade mark, commercial slogan / inscribed like an advertisement on a bit of glossy and colored paper (have it made by a printer) – this paper glued / to the article: ‘Chocolate Grinder.’’ *Broyeuse I* functions as a proto-readymade itself, both in its

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<sup>10</sup> The phrase “cathedral of commerce” was popularized by a Brooklyn minister, Samuel Parks Cadman, in a promotional pamphlet of the same name.

<sup>11</sup> The majority of the January 1916 Woolworth note in *À l’infinif* outlines an unrealized project based on a type of display case: “I. Vitrine avec verres roulant. . . II. Avec une vitrine-buffet: fermée par des verres glaces verres roulant sur des billes. . .” (DDS 111-12) ‘I. Show-case with sliding panes. . . II. With show-case dresser: closed by glass panes sliding panes on ball bearings. . .’ This overlap between the shop-window and the display case mirrored Woolworth’s thoughts: “Draw them [customers] in with attractive window displays and when you get them in have a plentiful showing of the window goods on the counters. . . Remember our advertisements are in our show windows and on our counters” (Fenske 25).

<sup>12</sup> Duchamp wrote: “The general effect is like an architectural, dry rendering of the chocolate grinding machine purified of all past influences” (quoted in d’Harnoncourt 272), that is, all past aesthetics.

temporal concurrence with the fellow bachelor-machine readymade *Bicycle Wheel* and as an intersection of advertisement-like, aesthetic inscription and a chosen commodity represented an-aesthetically. This, therefore, ties the readymade project to the shop window and store front, the theatrical framing and spectacle of commodity capitalism, the “spectacle [qui] me [Duchamp] fascina tellement que je pris cette machine comme point de départ” (DDS 173) ‘spectacle [that] so fascinated me [Duchamp] that I took this machine as a point of departure.’<sup>13</sup> The shop window, along with the store front in which it is imbedded, functions as the locus of consumer capitalism; they perform commodity aesthetics for, or rather at, the passerby potential customer.

As the readymade productively fails to escape the aesthetics of the commodity form, so too do Duchamp and his readymade project appear concerned with potentially productive failures of the commodity aesthetics of the theatrical shop window. After his spectacular encounter with the chocolate grinder in the shop window, Duchamp jotted a quick and subsequently famous note, which he later juxtaposed with the Woolworth note in *À l’infinifit*:

La question des devantures:.

Subir l’interrogatoire des devantures:.

L’exigence de la devanture: . . . .

Quand on subit l’interrogatoire de devantures, on prononce aussi sa propre Condamnation. En effet, le choix est allé et retour. De la demande des devantures, de l’inévitable réponse aux devantures, se conclut l’arrêt du choix. Pas d’entêtement, par l’absurde, à cache le coït à travers une glace aven un ou plusieurs objets de la devanture. (DDS 111)

The question of the shop windows:.

To undergo the interrogation of shop windows:.

The exigency of shop windows: . . . .

When one undergoes the interrogation of the shop window, one pronounces one’s own Condemnation. In fact, the choice is “round trip.” With the demands of the shop windows, with the inevitable response to shop windows, the cessation of choice concludes. No obstinacy, ad absurdum, of hiding the coition through a glass pane with one or many objects of the shop window.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the importance of the shop window to Duchamp’s works, particularly *The Large Glass* and the mechanical drawing that connects it to both *Chocolate Grinder* and therefore the readymades, see Tamara Trodd’s *The Art of Mechanical Reproduction*, especially 82-88.

<sup>14</sup> The note is dated “Neuilly 1913,” the town and year in which Duchamp lived when he visited the confectioner’s shop in Rouen. While *devanture* could also be translated as ‘store front’ or the more general ‘frontage,’ the more common translation of ‘shop window,’ which is the

In conjunction with Wood's capitalized defense, "he CHOSE it," Molesworth sees in this quote the predicament of the modern shopper who must "choose one thing over another . . . [but] first must navigate the perilous waters of taste" (174). With recourse to Pierre Bourdieu's *La distinction*, Molesworth continues by asserting that this minefield of choice and taste, the intersection of which dominates the choice of the readymade object, "is in many ways synonymous with the creation and presentation of the self" (175). However, Duchamp's note appears less interested in the choice and taste of shopping, of commodity acquisition, than in window shopping, that complex of interrogations and responses of and by the window shopper as potential-consumer.<sup>15</sup> Such an interaction is neither innocent nor innocuous, the cessation of choice beginning from the moment of the shop window's demands, a battery of questions, an interrogation to which one must submit, a condemnation from the start. The interpellation of the passerby into a potential-consumer, into a subject of consumer capitalism begins with their turn towards the shop window just as Louis Althusser's infamous police officer transforms individuals into subjects as they turn towards the officer's interpellation "Hey, you there!"<sup>16</sup> That is, subject formation occurs not only in the acquisition of a commodity, but already in the turn towards the shop window that theatrically, aesthetically displays it.

If the project of the readymade expands beyond the commodity form to include the shop window, as works like *Woolworth Building* and *Broyeuse I* indicate, and investigates the role of these commodity aesthetics on subject formation within commodity capitalism, as Molesworth argues and Duchamp implies, Baudrillard's *La société du consommation* and Haug's *Kritik der Warenästhetik* offer the most pertinent theoretical frameworks. Investigating the formation of the subject in the face of the shop window, Baudrillard complicates Jacques Lacan's conception of mirror-stage subject formation within consumer capitalism: "Il n'y a plus de miroir ou de glace dans l'ordre moderne, où l'homme soit affronté à son image pour le meilleur ou le pire, il n'y a plus que *de la vitrine*" (*Société* 309) 'There is no longer any mirror or window in the modern order in which the human being would be confronted with their image for better or for

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overwhelmingly dominant feature of store fronts, follows other translations. See translations in Mileaf 44 and Duchamp's *Essential Writings* 74.

<sup>15</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the verb to "window shop" and its variations such as "window shopping" and "window shopper" appeared for the first time only twenty some years earlier in the *New York Daily Tribune* (1890) and gained wide popularity in the first decade of the twentieth century.

<sup>16</sup> See Althusser's *Sur la reproduction* 226. There are a number of parallels between Althusser's infamous example of interpellation and that of the shop window, perhaps most fundamentally that its interpellation always "arrives at its destination *since its destination is wherever it arrives*" (Žižek 12).

worse; there is only *the shop window*.' There are no innocent mirrors, no unimpeachable reflections that show things as they are "for better or for worse," only reflections distorted by commodity aesthetics and their spectacular mise-en-scène behind a shop window. While Baudrillard's project is particularly focused upon a post-war consumer society, Janet Ward convincingly argues that Baudrillard's investigation is applicable not only to late capitalism, but also the rise in consumer culture and commodity capitalism in the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly as it relates to the shop window (191-240, esp. 196-98). Indeed, Haug also utilizes the allegory of reflection and mirrors in his description of subject formation within Fordist commodity aesthetics (*Kritik* 82, *Critique* 50-52). In these scenarios, the potential consumer, now turned to the shop window, sees their reflection not as the wholly constituted gestalt reflected for Lacan's infant, but rather only as incomplete in the plate glass so carefully chosen by the department store and its architect, a partial reflection that hovers superimposed and ghostlike amidst the spectacular phantasmagoria of commodities. The fragmented reflection forms a fragmented subject, the dark invisible areas of the potential-consumer's reflection made whole, fulfilled only by the illuminated commodities behind the shop window. The individual passerby interpellated by the shop window is only able to imagine their subjective fulfillment thanks to the amalgamation of their partial reflection with the aestheticized commodities positioned just so. For the window shopper who has no intention to purchase a commodity at all, such commodities promise utility in so far as they provide and reinforce subjecthood, or a framework of subjecthoods.

With the passerby interpellated by, and now turned towards, the shop window, this subject formation is further reinforced and manipulated by the shop window's exigency, its demands, its interrogations that condemn the individual to subjectivity within consumer capitalism. For Baudrillard, the consumer in front of the shop window "se définit par un 'jeu' de modèles et par son choix, c'est-à-dire par son implication combinatoire dans ce jeu" (*Société* 310) 'defines themselves by their choice within a "game" played between different models or, in other words, by their combinatorial involvement in that game.'<sup>17</sup> The game of window shopping is the purchase of subjective and discursive existence, of a "Sprache zur Ausdeutung ihrer selbst und der Welt" (*Kritik* 82) 'language to interpret their existence and the world' (*Critique* 52). The "coition through a glass pane with one or many objects of the shop window" becomes an acculturating educational apparatus where the potential-consumer subject learns the vocabulary of their own subjection to and subjectivity within consumer capitalism. The window shopper plays the game, performs consumer capitalism without purchase, without whole-hearted participation, what Baudrillard called "le flirt avec les objets" (*Société* 21)

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<sup>17</sup> My translation. See *Consumer* 193.

‘flirting with the objects’ (*Consumer* 27). This flirtation is not merely with the objects, however, but what they represent: the promised fulfilment of the potential consumer’s lack, a promise of subjecthood. To transform the game of window shopping into the reality of actually shopping, this promise must be put to the test. It must always and necessarily be hollow, and therefore continually renewable, a perpetual Althusserian reproduction of capital. To entice yet another attempt, the promise of purchase and possession, the removal of the commodity from the sphere of exchange must disappoint. Duchamp concluded his note on the shop window with precisely this disappointment: “La peine consiste à couper la glace et à s’en mordre les pouces dès que la possession est consommée” (*DDS* 111) ‘The penalty consists of cutting the pane and in feeling regret as soon as possession is consummated.’ The aesthetics of the shop window, its demands and interrogations, become an unwinnable game, the window shopper continually confronted with the unfulfilled aspects of their existence, the shopper continually disappointed in their attempts at fulfillment.

If the successful readymade is meant to radically avoid the commodity aesthetics of the object, and therefore the subject formations that the choice of that object entail, the readymade must also mean to avoid the commodity’s aesthetic presentation and must silence the shop window’s demands, exigencies, and interrogations. Nesbit suggests that the readymade has already succeeded: “In the ready-mades, Duchamp seized control of the dialogue dictated by the shop window: the model is taken out of circulation, often given an absurd title, hung in limbo, and effectively silenced” (61-62). This, however, is less a control of the shop window’s dialogue than of the commodity’s use as a material object. The commodity’s utility to provide and reinforce subjecthood remains, if now shifted from the window shopper to the museum patron. As Molesworth argues, the department store and the museum of the early twentieth century enjoyed an analogous, if somewhat antagonistic, relationship (see Molesworth 176-78). The dialogue of aesthetics, taste, and theatrical presentation, as well as the subjectivities that these dialogues form and reinforce, has merely been translated, repeated, and relocated, from the store front’s window frame to the museum’s pedestal and display case. Duchamp almost seems to allude to this relocation with the subtitle to his *Large Glass*, a work intimately tied to the project of the readymades. In the notes for his 1922 work, *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*), also known simply as *The Large Glass*, Duchamp wrote: “Sorte de sous-titre / RETARD EN VERRE” (*DDS* 63) ‘Type of subtitle / DELAY IN GLASS.’ This is not merely the delay of window shopping’s unfulfilled purchase, but also, to use a synonym of *retard*, an ‘amusement in glass,’ the playful diversion of inconsequential performance, a flirtation with the objects behind the glass. Still a third potential reading may indicate the work’s deeper affinity to the readymade

project, *retard* as a ‘step back’ or ‘recoil in glass,’ a subversive representation of the radical avoidance of the commodity aesthetics of the object and its presentation.

*With Hidden Noise* is perhaps the most extreme and successful of the readymades; it recoils or attempts to recoil from all facets of commodity aesthetics. This serves to highlight all the more strongly, however, the elements of those aesthetics that *Noise* fails to avoid as well as the unique ways in which it fails to avoid them. *Noise* is composed of a hollow spool of twine held in place between two brass plates by four long bolts. Before its final assembly, however, Duchamp’s friend Arensburg placed a small object into the cavity of the spool which, when hit against the inside of the brass plates, creates the titular hidden noise. The readymade object is less Duchamp’s twine, brass plates, and bolts than it is Arensburg’s mysterious object. In this regard, the work is nothing if not a recoil from the commodity aesthetics of object and presentation. The object, hidden behind the radical opacity of brass plates and a ball of twine firmly secured by four bolts, is so removed from the aesthetics of object and presentation that the object itself is not visible and is outside the economy of taste. Instead, the object is relegated not to the production of sound, but to a hidden noise, the unwanted cacophony filtered from meaningful communication, an-aesthetic, an-sensical, an-hermeneutic. Duchamp was clear in expressing how he thought of this object, even if he was never sure what the object was: “Arensburg put something inside the ball of twine. . . . I will never know if it is a diamond or a coin” (Sweeney 95). Indeed, Duchamp referred to the work as “tirelire” (*DDS* 68), a piggy bank. Regardless of what it actually is, Duchamp considered the object a commodity, not only given a presumed potential exchange value but read as pure exchange value, a universal commodity.<sup>18</sup> Though radically denied any “sinnliche Erscheinung und Sinn ihres Gebrauchswerts . . . das Gebrauchswertsversprechen” (*Kritik* 29) ‘sensual appearance and the conception of its use-value . . . the promise of use-value’ (*Critique* 16-17) behind two brass plates and a ball of twine, the object-commodity continues to make noise as commodity, to promise an exchange value regardless of what the specific value may be. “Vom Tauschwertstandpunkt aus ist der Gebrauchswert nur der Köder” (*Kritik* 27) ‘From the point of view of exchange-value, the use-value is only the bait’ (*Critique* 15). The object-commodity and its

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<sup>18</sup> For Adam Smith the diamond “has scarcely any value in use; but a very great quantity of other goods may frequently be had in exchange for it” (1: 45). This is similar to Marx’s view of precious metals, whose “Seltenheit wegen den rein auf dem Tausche gegründeten Wert mehr darstellen” (*Ökonomische Manuskripte* 99) ‘very scarcity makes them more representative of value founded purely upon exchange’ (*Economic Manuscripts* 103). For Marx: “Das Geld [ist] die gemeinsame Form, worin sich alle Waren als Tauschwerte verwandeln, die allgemeine Ware” (*Ökonomische Manuskripte* 98) ‘Money [is] the common form into which all commodities transform themselves as exchange values, the general commodity’ (*Economic Manuscripts* 102).

presentation remain a muffled but ultimately unsilenced commodity aesthetics, a hook without bait.<sup>19</sup>

*Noise*'s inscription alludes to this recoil that promises, a promise of use- and exchange-value that is unfulfillable. This ultimately results in a productive failure of commodity aesthetics. Duchamp described this inscription as “an exercise in comparative orthography . . . French and English are mixed and make no ‘sense’” (Schwarz 644). Each brass plate is separately inscribed:

. IR . CAR . É LONGSEA →	P . G . ECIDES DÉBARRASSE .
F . NE, . HEA ., . O . SQUE →	LE . D . SERT . F . URNIS . ENT
TE . U S . ARP BAR . AIN →	AS HOW . V . R COR . ESPONDS

A combination of elements from both *The* and *Rendez-vous*, any potential sense of the inscription is shrouded by its multilingualism, typographical elisions, grammar, and syntax. While Duchamp places the word “sense” in scare quotes in his description above, the framework within which he viewed the inscription is clear: “letters were occasionally missing like in a neon sign when one letter is not lit and makes the word unintelligible” (d’Harnoncourt 280). Though a simple allusion to commodity signage, broken and illegible, the neon-sign-inscription is *Noise*'s most obvious form of commodity aesthetics. The final two lines of the inscription read:

F(I)NE, (C)HEA(P), (L)O(R)SQUE →	LE(S) D(E)SERT(S) F(O)URNIS(S)ENT
TE(N)U S(H)ARP BAR(G)AIN →	AS HOW(E)V(E)R COR(R)ESPONDS
FINE, CHEAP, WHILE →	THE DESERTS PROVIDE
KEPT SHARP BARGAIN →	AS HOWEVER CORRESPONDS <sup>20</sup>

The restored neon sign narrates commodity exchange: something “fine” hidden within these outwardly “cheap,” desolate, “desert”-like materials which promise to “provide” a “sharp bargain.” Once more, the bait of use value denied the commodity by *Noise*'s recoil from the aesthetics of presentation, the inscription turns toward a commodity aesthetics of bargain, of exchange value, a narrative promise from commodity to commodity, commodity speech: “Indem die Waren miteinander sprechen, *versprechen* sie sich ihre Austauschbarkeit” (Hamacher 73) ‘In speaking with one another, commodities *promise* one another their

<sup>19</sup> In many ways, this is a double promise, as only few have ever heard the titular noise, who assure everyone else.

<sup>20</sup> Also inscribed on the work are the instructions to fix the neon sign: “Remplacer chaque point par une lettre → / Convenablement choisie dans la même colonne” ‘Replace each period by a letter → / Suitably chosen from the same column.’ See Schwarz 644.

exchangeability' (Barry 170-71).<sup>21</sup> *Noise*, too, attempts to recoil from this final bastion of commodity aesthetics, commodity speech, in its supposedly indecipherable, multilingual, and an-sensical inscription. Invariably, this inscription fails as well, seemingly purposefully: its reconstruction prescribed, its vocabulary aligned to the aesthetics of exchange and commodity speech. Once again, however, it is a productive failure, a subversive performance of a symbolic order that is ineradicable, of a commodity aesthetics that appears even when the commodity itself does not, and that aesthetic's perpetual invocation of promise even when divorced from any referent of that promise.

The severity, success, and failures of *Noise* help to clarify the readymade project. *The Blind Man*'s oft-quoted defense of readymades also seems to take on a new significance: the creator of the readymade "took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object" (5). The useful significance of the object-commodity within *Noise* disappeared literally within its brass and twine enclosure and figuratively behind the an-sensical inscription comprising periods and two languages. Commodity aesthetics remain, despite these extreme measures, a radical attempt to muzzle any useful significance, any aesthetics or sense, of the object. As a readymade, however, the commodity's aesthetics are displayed for inspection, exhibited in relative isolation from consumer capitalism, its promises muzzled—the commodity and its aesthetics to be scrutinized by the so-called high aesthetics of the museum and world of art. With *Noise*, the failure of this subjection to fully extinguish commodity aesthetics, to truly create a new thought for the object divorced from its commodification emphasizes that not only is there no hope for commodities (combs, urinals, shovels, postcards, etc.) to abandon their commodity aesthetics, or even be stripped of them, there is not even hope of simple noise divorced from these aesthetics. Commodity aesthetics, even in the absence of commodities, are ubiquitous. Duchamp, as creator of the readymades in the shadow of Fordist mass production and as commentator of them from the middle of the so-called Golden Age of Capitalism, examined the pervasiveness of commodity aesthetics not merely in commodities or a consumer's interactions with them, but between individuals themselves, without commodities as medium of interaction. Commodity aesthetics have infected every aspect of our lives. As Baudrillard later argued: "la communication qui s'établit au niveau de la vitrine n'est . . . qu'une communication généralisée de tous les individus entre eux à travers . . . la lecture et la reconnaissance, dans les mêmes objets, du même systèmes de signes" (*Société* 265) 'the communication which is established at the level of the shop-window is . . . but . . . a generalized communication between all individuals . . . via the reading

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<sup>21</sup> See Derrida's *Spectres de Marx* 250-51, where he reads Marx's account of the speaking commodity. Though Derrida draws from multiple elements in Marx's thought, see especially *Kapital* 66-67 and 97.

and recognition in the same objects of the same system of signs' (*Consumer* 167). Duchamp's investigations, however, not only prefigured and performed later critiques of commodity aesthetics, but paralleled the ideas of his contemporaries.

Inscribed on April 24, 1916, *With Hidden Noise* was completed just over a week after a small, unknown group of fellow emigrants had, similar to Duchamp, fled the war to a neutral land. Less than three months later the de facto leader of this group, Hugo Ball, would give his "Eröffnungs-Manifest, 1. Dada-Abend" 'Opening Manifesto, 1<sup>st</sup> Dada Evening' on Bastille Day, the 14<sup>th</sup> of July. Disturbed by the capitalist degradation of language, Ball decried this new, "vermaledeite Sprache, an der Schmutz klebt wie von Maklerhänden, die die Münzen abgegriffen haben" (13) 'accursed language, to which filth clings as from stockbrokers' hands that have worn coins down.' The curse of the commodification of language and the symbolic order, the manic promise of use and exchange, of a stockbroker's sharp bargains, is the curse of language that has been co-opted by commodity aesthetics in order to make consumer-subjects of us all, a curse against which Duchamp and, unbeknownst to him at the time, his Dadaist contemporaries and future comrades would fight.

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