

CLASSIFICATIONS

IS THIS ART?

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'To an innocent eye, how pleasant is its chaste simplicity of line and color! Someone said, "Like a lovely Buddha", someone said "Like the legs of the ladies by Cézanne.'

Louise Norton about Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, 'Buddha of the Bathroom', in *The Blind Man* n^o. 2, May 1917

'Something that I'd like to make very clear is that my choice of these readymades was never dictated by some aesthetic delectation. The choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference, coupled at the same time with a total absence of taste, good or bad... in fact, it was in complete anaesthesia.'

Marcel Duchamp, 'A Propos of "Readymades"'. Talk given at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1961; published in *Art and Artists* n^o. 4, July 1966

The Fountain Archives and Beyond...

by Yasmine d'O., Berlin, 19 April 2021

In April 1917 in New York, Marcel Duchamp anonymously submitted to the committee of the Society of Independent Artists, of which he was a member, a work titled *Fountain*, which consisted of an upside-down urinal signed 'R. Mutt, 1917'. Under the pseudonym of Richard Mutt, Duchamp was testing the limits of the founding principle of the Independents: to accept all works. However, *Fountain* was rejected by the recently-formed New York-based society, in complete contradiction with its own founding principles. To mark his disapproval, Duchamp immediately resigned from the directing committee. He then orchestrated a plan, and the scandal the whole affair was sure to stir up, for *Fountain* to appear in the magazine *The Blindman*, which he had co-founded with Beatrice Wood and Henri-Pierre Roché. This is how a reproduction of a photograph taken by Alfred Stieglitz along with an article written by Louise Norton titled 'The Richard Mutt Case' would ensure *Fountain* went down in art history. In May 1917, a few weeks after the inauguration of the Society's exhibition, the publication was released and the sculpture vanished, never to be seen again. The photograph taken by Stieglitz is one of the rare pieces of evidence we have of its physical existence.

While Marcel Duchamp spoke of his upside-down urinal and his readymades in general as the result of a 'visual indifference' coupled with 'complete anaesthesia', his accomplice, Louise Norton, in this very first article, asserted: '...how pleasant is its chaste simplicity of line and color!' Then she compared it to a 'lovely Buddha' and to the 'legs of the ladies by Cézanne', both suggestive interpretations conjuring up the viewer's individual tastes. This initial contradiction seems to have determined the destiny of the legendary readymade, which, despite its rejection in 1917 by the Society of Independent Artists of New York for its first exhibition, would become the most controversial and talked

about work of art in the twentieth century and beyond. Saâdane Afif transformed the printed dissemination of this ongoing prolific discussion into the material for a monumental work of art, *The Fountain Archives*, which examines the incredible capacity of art to produce a narrative.

In 2008, Afif started to gather all types of publications where one or more reproductions of *Fountain* appeared. This collection triggered the creation of an installation that would take shape with the help of a strict protocol over the next ten years. When a page is found, it is torn out, inventoried, numbered and then carefully framed. This collection of pages constitutes the 'active' series of the project, its fuel. The publication and its torn-out page(s) receive the same inventory number from FA.0001 to FA.1001, the quixotic limit the artist set for himself for closing the archives. If a publication contains images of the urinal on several pages, all of them are used to form an indivisible polyptych. The numbered pages and their bibliographic references are recorded and made available on a website: www.thefountainarchives.net. Based on the mass publishing sector and its industrial reproduction, this process, through a simple gesture, maintains the economy of the multiple. However, by extracting a page from a publication that exists in hundreds even thousands of copies, Afif is recreating uniqueness, singularity. As Michel Gauthier points out: 'In the dialectical reversal of reproduction and production, multiple and unique lies the root of what makes Afif's art so crucial: a poetic revival and rebound against the vain utopia where works are self-sufficient and perfectly closed in on themselves.'

Not only does this destructive gesture confer upon the printed page its uniqueness, but, in a single movement, it also does the same to the publication from which the page was taken. The publication becomes the mould or the unique matrix of the torn page. Over the years, these amputated publications have been meticulously stored and categorised on bookshelves in the artist's apartment. They have slowly produced a silent archive, a hollow archive without the object to which it refers. Just as Duchamp's urinal rightfully



Saâdane Afif, *The Fountain Archives*, the artist at work.



Saâdane Afif, *The Fountain Archives*, FA.0385, 0389, 0390, 0391, 0392, 0394 a/b, 0397, 0398, 0399, 0402 a/b, 0404, 0405, 0407, 0409, 2014. Courtesy Dimitris Passas Collection and Galerie Mehdi Chouakri. Photo: Stephan Redel.

became a sculpture due to a combination of circumstances, these industrial bookshelves and the publications they contain offer themselves up as a sculpture, a type of readymade aggregate constituting the central element of the installation *The Fountain Archives*. They narrate the long process that has reigned over their creation while attesting to the extraordinary diversity of subjects *Fountain* has brought to light.

As for the framed pages forming the 'active' series, they have continuously been redistributed through the regular channels in the world of art (galleries, art centres, museums), producing the economy needed for the viability of the project. Over time, these numerous exhibitions also sparked commentary that in turn became the object of publications. Images of *Fountain* currently illustrate Afif's work thus signalling an evolution in the development of the archives in which the project creates its own material. Five years after the start of the collection, the first of these pages appeared in a catalogue published for the exhibition *The Present Order is the Disorder of the Future* at the Museum Kurhaus Kleve in Germany and received inventory number FA.0366. It inaugurated the creation of an archive within the archive called *The Augmented Series*. If, according to Duchamp, the viewer 'completes' the work, then this unexpected series augments it. These new publications are added to the archive in two copies: the regular copy and the artist's proof. This is how the series becomes physically readable on the bookshelves. Normally, commentary arises from the work. Here, the work arises from the commentary, from the very tool used for its mediation. The social apparatus that contributes to the circulation of the work participates in its production. The final *Augmented Series* includes an indivisible set of 147 frames from 69 publications, which represents around 10% of all pages framed for the creation of the entire project. This corpus constitutes the second element of *The Fountain Archives* installation.

Within the extension of the protocol *Lyrics* – which Afif started in 2004 for his exhibition *Melancholic Beat* at Museum Folkwang in Essen – in which he asks people close to him to

of one of the torn pages from *The Fountain Archives* listed the names of the people involved in the project and announced an upcoming concert: *At Le Silencio, in Paris, 29 November 2018, at 9pm, Susanne Fröhlich (flute) & Claudia van Hasselt (voice) will interpret 'Musiques pour tuyauterie', composed by Augustin Maurs. Based on texts by: Sarah Ancelle Schönfeld, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Jonathan Monk, Lili Reynaud-Dewar, Willem de Rooij, Kilian Rüthemann, Yorgos Sapountzis, Jerszy Seymour, Louis-Philippe Scoufaras, Athena Vida.*

Fountain – 1917, Fontaine – 1917, Fontäne – 1917, 2017

In 2016, the year before the centenary of *Fountain*, Afif compiled a collection of old postcards depicting a 'real' fountain. These postcards also shared a common past, having all been in circulation in 1917. Defined by the same attributes as the vanished urinal, 'fountain' and '1917', they depict, through the texts and images they contain, the society in which Duchamp's work was born: a society in which the expansion of the concept of leisure, represented by urban planning approaches and the embellishment of public spaces, was stopped in its tracks by a long, cruel war. In 2017, the numbered postcards were posted on a public Instagram account on the exact day they were postmarked a century earlier. Grouped by month, they were then framed to produce a type of calendar: *Fountain – 1917 (A Collection)*. Finally, a book including a preface written by Tacita Dean was published by b.frank books, Zurich.



Saadane Afif, *Fountain – 1917 (A Collection)*, detail (April), postcard, 2018. Courtesy Rigo-Saitta Collection.



Saadane Afif, *The Fountain Archives (Bookshelf)*, detail, 2008-21. Photo: Katharina Kritzler.

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