

The Sublime Object of Iconology:

Duchampian Appellation as Žižekian Interpellation

Robert Kilroy (Trinity College Dublin)

This essay considers the question of “naming” by re-examining the works of the artist Marcel Duchamp on the basis of the conceptual apparatus developed by the Lacanian psychoanalyst and philosopher Slavoj Žižek. For Žižek, naming is understood in terms of its broader social-symbolic texture as a ritualistic, meaning making activity that constitutes the zero level of collectivized belief. The act of appellation is thus seen to function as a strategic operation insofar as it is the fundamental bedrock of ideological interpellation—a performative gesture that situates its bearer as “subject.” As I argue, through his use of titles in general and his *Fountain-Urinal* in particular, Duchamp openly stages this operation within the parameters of the aesthetic field. In doing so, Duchamp’s oeuvre might be said to render visible the fundamental co-ordinates of Žižek’s theoretical framework while at the same time becoming re-habilitated to its psychoanalytic core.

Au travers d’une ré-interrogation de l’œuvre de Marcel Duchamp, cette contribution se propose d’explorer l’acte de nommer d’un point de vue

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psychanalytique. Selon le philosophe et psychanalyste lacanien Slavoj Žižek, l'acte de nommer est à considérer dans toute sa texture socio-symbolique. C'est un acte ritualisé significatif qui constitue la base de la croyance collective. L'acte de nommer fonctionne donc à la manière d'une opération stratégique car c'est le socle de l'interpellation idéologique – c'est un geste performatif qui fait de son énonciateur un « sujet ». Ce sont les titres des œuvres de Duchamp, et en particulier son *readymade* connu sous le titre de *Fontaine*, qui rendent visible cette fonction idéologique sur un plan esthétique. Ainsi, Duchamp fait apparaître les coordonnées fondamentales du cadre théorique žižekien et, par un même mouvement, l'œuvre duchampienne retrouve son essence psychanalytique.

PJs: Veiling as naming

Every evening, around 6 o'clock in the *Palazzo Venier dei Leoni* in Venice, just after the Peggy Guggenheim Collection has closed its doors to the public, a curious incident takes place. The museum's band of enthusiastic interns—a culturally diverse group of university graduates brought together, in the name of “art,” from far-reaching corners of the globe—perform an unusual ritual which they affectionately refer to as “PJs”: each of the modern “masterpieces” hanging in the walls of the Palazzo is put to bed for the night by being covered in a thin piece of material on the front of which is an ink drawing indicating the particular painting sleeping snugly underneath.

What is especially interesting about this ritual is the way it repeats a similar procedure performed by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan when welcoming friends to his apartment at rue de Lille in Paris. After dinner, Lacan would lead his guests to a back room where they were presented with a sliding wooden panel hanging on a wall. On the front of the panel was an ink sketch—drawn by Lacan's brother-in-law, the surrealist painter André Masson—of the painting concealed underneath: Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (1866), a highly erotic, semi-pornographic study of female genitalia

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which Lacan would deliberately reveal to his startled guests by slowly sliding back the panel.¹

It is widely acknowledged that, through this operation, Lacan was repeating a practice first performed by the work's original owner—an Ottoman diplomat named Khalil Bey—who, for reasons of censorship, kept the controversial painting hidden underneath a green veil. What has not yet been fully explored, however, is the possibility that Lacan, by replacing the veil with a thick wooden mechanism, may have been attempting to say more about the act of concealment than the thing concealed; that is, the role of the veil itself in sustaining the fascinating lure of the painting behind it; or, the function of the PJs in maintaining the status of the masterpiece.

To begin to understand Lacan's gesture of concealment/revelation, one need look no further than his ongoing theorization of the relationship between vision and desire at the time, a prolonged period of research which found its most precise articulation in his 1964 seminar on the gaze.² According to Lacan,

¹ Michael R. Taylor, ed., *Marcel Duchamp: Étant Donnés* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2009), 127.

² It is in Seminar XI that Lacan appears to shed light on the broader significance of the wooden panel when, through reference to a story of two competing artists, he demonstrates how the circuit of desire can be reversed on a visual plane through a precise painterly operation. This occurs, Lacan explains, when the artist Parrhasius dupes his adversary Zeuxis by simply painting an image of a veil on a wall. As a result, Zeuxis is provoked into declaring "Well, and now show us what you have painted behind it!" See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York & London: Norton & Company, 1981), 103. For a full elaboration of how

the effect of grounding the surface of the concealing mechanism (the veil, the wooden panel) is that it breaks what, in the praxis of psychoanalysis, is known as the transferential illusion: the illusory belief that there exists some elusive thing beyond the phenomenal appearance, that the everyday object is invested with some imaginary surplus quality. In his revised reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Slavoj Žižek describes this illusion as a perspectival error whereby “the meaning of a certain element” is misperceived as being present in this element “from the very beginning as its immanent essence.”³ Following Lacan’s lead, Žižek also uses the example of painting to demonstrate how such an illusion is dissolved when, in his seminal work *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (2008), he tells the following joke:

At an art exhibition in Moscow, there is a picture showing Nazezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife, in bed with a younger member of the Komsomol. The title of the picture is “Lenin in Warsaw.” A bewildered visitor asks a guide: “But where is Lenin?” The guide replies quietly and with dignity: “Lenin is in Warsaw” [...].⁴

this point relates to Courbet’s *L’Origine du monde* see Robert Kilroy, “Marcel Duchamp: Resolving the Word-Image Problematic, afterthought,” doctoral thesis, 2014. For an exploration of how both Courbet’s work and Lacan’s gesture allow for a new understanding of cinema and social media see Robert Kilroy, “Facebook: The Central Place of the Lacanian Clinic,” *Lacunae. APPI International Journal for Lacanian Psychoanalysis* 3, no. 11 (2015): 1—22. For an examination of how this particular aspect of Lacanian theory relates to the work of Édouard Manet and Charles Baudelaire see Robert Kilroy, “Manet’s Selfie and the Baudelairean Parallax,” Sinéad Furlong-Clancy (ed.), *The DS Project: Image, Text, Space/Place, 1830-2015*, 2015. <http://thedsproject.com/>

³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 113.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

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Before dismissing this joke as yet another example of what Žižek himself might refer to as a “sally of wit”⁵ one should note how it actually displays an important theoretical point: how the response on the part of the bewildered viewer is structurally homologous to that created by Lacan’s sliding panel.⁶ The crucial difference, however, is that through his joke Žižek approaches the operation performed by Lacan from the perspective of *the painting’s title*. In other words, what the “Lenin joke” shows us is that the response of the viewer to the breakdown in the transferential illusion is ultimately provoked by *the act of naming*.

It is at this point that the somewhat meandering path taken in our introduction—the discussion of the literal veiling of paintings and the creation of desire through visual operations—might be said to acquire renewed significance. While it is tempting to dismiss these concerns as irrelevant to a discussion of naming—just as it is all too easy to reduce them to the level of an analogy—one must resist from obscuring their theoretical significance: the fact that such a “short-circuit” of different levels foregrounds Lacan’s radical re-thinking of the relationship between language and desire and, in doing so,

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ That is to say, the question posed by the viewer in Žižek’s joke (“Where is Lenin?”) is structurally equivalent to the demand made by the painter in Lacan’s analogy (“Now show us what you have painted behind it!”).

calls for a new understanding of the relation between painting and the act of naming.⁷

My working thesis is that this step is taken when we read Duchamp with Žižek and vice versa. Thus, in the remainder of this essay I will attempt to provoke the necessary “short-circuit” by crossing wires between the Žižekian and Duchampian fields. First, I will attempt to understand the relationship between the title and the work of art in Duchamp’s oeuvre by reading it on the basis of Žižek’s theorization of the relationship between the act of naming (*appellation*) and ideology (*interpellation*). The basic claim being made here, to put it in Žižek’s own terms, is that only through the lens of Žižek’s conceptual apparatus can Duchamp’s work become re-habilitated in its psychoanalytic

⁷ For Lacan, the register of desire and vision (the Imaginary) is not located on a separate plane to that of the signifier and language (the Symbolic): rather, the two conceptual categories are more like the front and back of the same surface which, as Žižek puts it, can never meet for specific “structural reasons”. See Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, 11. Such an insight opens the possibility of a new understanding of the word/image relation, what I have elsewhere termed the “word/image parallax.” Following Žižek, the thesis is that the two poles of painting and title are not in external opposition but, through a twist in perspective, are viewed as two sides of a single mechanism which is split from within by an inherent tension or “parallax gap.” It is thus by reading the veil *as a name*, the painting *as a title*, that this paper seeks to actualize the parallax relation in question. In relation to Duchamp, this involves moving beyond (or more precisely, beneath) the false opposition between title and painting which presents itself in his oeuvre. This is only possible if one first escapes the framework of interpretation which holds this opposition in place: the prism of the aesthetic field (or more precisely, the transcendental categories mapped by the Kantian field of representation) through which Duchamp’s works are seen as an “avant-garde” exercise in stylistic innovation or technical radicalism, a new mode of visual representation that challenges the norms of perceptual reception. I argue that, through such a lens, the true import of his work is obscured. For a full elaboration of this argument see Kilroy, “Resolving the Word/Image Problematic.”

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core. Following this, I will attempt to re-actualize the aesthetic foundations of Žižek's thought by changing perspectives and re-reading his conceptual framework against the backdrop of Duchamp's oeuvre. It will be argued that, through the Duchampian title, the Žižekian name acquires its full significance; or that, in the Duchampian field—at the level of the Duchampian title and the name “Art”—the fundamental co-ordinates of Žižek's theoretical apparatus are rendered visible.⁸

This short-circuiting of Žižek and Duchamp will occur on both a synchronic and diachronic level. In the first half of the paper I will focus on the specific notion of the Lacanian signifier and its relation to the title in Duchamp's work; in the second half, the analysis will be expanded as a reconceptualization of the postmodern interpretation of Duchamp's “readymade” which contributes to a revised reading of Žižek's notion of

⁸ For a detailed account of this argument see *ibid.* To summarize these claims in brief, my contention is that Žižek's conceptual apparatus contains a fundamental aesthetic-iconological limitation which has its origins in an incomplete reading of Lacan. For Žižek, Lacan's reading of Freud with Hegel points the way towards a revised notion of ideology. However, I would argue that Žižek does not fully account for the possibility that Lacan's reading of Freud with Hegel takes place on a fundamentally *aesthetic* level. Thus, missing from his theory of ideology are its fundamental *iconological* co-ordinates, a mechanism that emerges in the Duchampian field. Why Duchamp? Žižek takes as his departure point Lacan's assertion in Seminar XVI that “Marx invented the symptom,” but in doing so he overlooks the significance of the remarks that followed this statement: Lacan's insistence that “Duchamp invented contestation.” For a full theoretical elaboration of this critique of Žižek see Kilroy, “The Return of the Master: Re-actualizing Žižek to Lacan's Iconological Core,” *Lacunae. APPI International Journal for Lacanian Psychoanalysis* 3, no. 2 (2014): 40-58.

ideology. The argument that I present in the second part of this essay should thus be understood as an attempt to move beyond a basic application of Žižek’s conceptual categories to the field of art; rather, what is at stake is a radical reformulation of Žižek’s theory of ideology within the texture of the aesthetic field: such that, as the Duchampian apparatus, the co-ordinates of Žižek’s notion of ideology appear in their purest form.⁹

The Žižekian title and the Duchampian name

In making use of his “Lenin joke,” Žižek’s aim is to demonstrate what he terms the “radical contingency of naming” or the “dogmatic stupidity” of the signifier.¹⁰ His basic theoretical point is that, by forcing the viewer to ask the question “where in the object is the meaning which this signifier designates?” (“But where is Lenin?”), the painting’s title exposes the “logic of the master signifier.”¹¹ As he explains, one comes to recognize that the painting, as “the field of what is positively depicted,” is only fully constituted on the condition

⁹ While such a claim might not appear to be borne out explicitly in the analysis, this is only because the precise implications of the claim are to be located not in the content of the analysis itself but in *the form of the activity*: the fact that what the author is trying to do occurs not at the level of what *he says he is doing* but at the level of *what he is actually doing*. This is the logic which forms the basis of Lacan and Žižek’s methodological approach and which is best demonstrated by Lacan when he discusses the paradoxical nature of the words “I am lying”: if the statement is true it is a lie; if it is a lie then it is true; the point is that, ultimately, what the deadlock draws attention to is the form of the statement itself.

¹⁰ Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 105.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 180.

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that it is structured around a central lack; that is to say, “Lenin must be in Warsaw.” Thus, it is the exclusion of the missing representation—the fact that Lenin is in Warsaw—which “functions as a positive condition for the emergence of what is being depicted.”¹² The title, in other words, does not designate the painting’s content from a distance but takes the place of a void, of the “missing, ‘originally repressed’ representation.”¹³ It is this perspectival shift which is provoked by the hysterical reaction “where is Lenin?”: the viewer is disturbed because, unable to grasp any identifiable content, he or she is prevented from moving beyond the surface of the canvas.¹⁴

At this point, it becomes possible to read the function of the title in the work of Marcel Duchamp in a new way. Indeed, is there not an obvious

¹² *Ibid.*, 179.

¹³ Žižek fundamental argument is that Lacan’s notion of the signifier marks a radical break with post-structuralist thought: for him, the signifier does not “bring to mind any representation”; rather, it is simply an empty, tautological element which, through a metaphorical operation, comes to hold the place of a lack: it is not a material representative that expresses a signified-idea but “the substitute of some representation, the signifying element filling out the vacant place of the missing representation (of the depiction, that is, of Lenin himself)” *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁴ As with Lacan’s veil analogy, the viewer is confronted with the illusory nature of his desire—the fact that what you look at is never what you wish to see—and is thrown into a traumatic encounter with the surface of the canvas as the cause of his desire—the fact that the perceived limit preventing access to what he wishes to see is actually what is driving his fascination. What this brings to light is the fact that the mechanism of “desire-in-vision” (to use Rosalind Krauss’s term) is ultimately governed by a signifying structure: it is the workings of the title which provoke the desire to see more. This fantasy framework can therefore only be traversed when the metaphorical, tautological status of the title is recognized, when the opacity of the canvas is directly identified as an empty name. For reference, see Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 126.

structural homology between the response to Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (*Nu descendant un escalier*) (1912)—the controversial painting rejected by the hanging committee at the 1912 Salon des Indépendants—and the reaction of the bewildered viewer in Žižek's joke ("But where is Lenin?")? Duchamp himself appears to suggest as much through his repeated insistence that it was primarily on account of *the title* that the work was refused.¹⁵ What this draws our attention to is the initial question posed by the viewer who encounters the work for the first time: "where is the Nude?", "where is the content designated by the title?" This question is provoked because, like the painting of Lenin's wife and her lover, the "Nude" which is named in the title is nowhere to be seen in the painting. Instead, the viewer is confronted with the opacity of a flat canvas whose motif has been broken down into a point to point correspondence between lines, volumes and forms. In short, the title does not designate the woman in question; rather, the woman is absent and it is around this central void that the picture is constructed. It is in this way that Duchamp's title can be said to play the role of a pure signifier, in the Lacanian sense of the term: that is, an empty, tautological element that does not

¹⁵ As he explains, "they thought it was too much of a literary title, in a bad sense—in a caricatural way." It is the same misunderstanding, he maintains, which contributed to the subsequent scandal the work provoked at the New York Armory Show in 1913: "what contributed to the interest provoked by that canvas was its title." Marcel Duchamp, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (London: Da Capo Press, 1979), 83 and 44.

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designate content from a distance but holds the place of what is lacking in the field of representation itself.¹⁶

From the perspective of Žižek Studies, what are the implications of this interesting crossover between Žižek and Duchamp? What, in other words, might we gain—as Žižekians—from this curious intervention into the Duchampian field? How might a Duchampian viewpoint allow for a more complete understanding of the “radical contingency of naming”? It might be argued that, through the lens of Duchamp’s “Nude,” the erotic nature of the viewer’s activity in the Lenin joke—the anxious attempt to identify representational content, the excessive attachment to an illusory object beyond the surface of the canvas—becomes openly visible. The crucial point is that, in the “Nude,” the motif (Lenin) for which the viewer looks is *sexualized*. Consequently, the act of identifying a motif becomes *eroticized*: the painting’s representational content is staged as an object of desire; the dimension of

¹⁶ At issue here is not the simple “effacement” of the painting’s content by the title, since such a reading preserves the very word/image dualism which the paper seeks to challenge. The full expansion of the argument being made requires that one closely examine the precise evolution of the verbal dimension of Duchamp’s work: from the textual component of his early caricatures, to the development of his use of titles in the “Munich works,” to the complex system of notes developed in the “Green box.” This analysis would then need to focus on the poetic tradition from which Duchamp’s use of the signifier originated, a tradition defined by Lacan in Seminar VII as a psychoanalytic understanding of language. See Chapter IV, “The Symbolic: The Chocolate Grinder,” in Kilroy, “Resolving the Word/Image Problematic,” 184–238.

fascination (desire) which supports the viewer's attachment to the object's immutable essence is exposed.

This specific effect is best demonstrated by Duchamp's decision to add the title "Fountain" to an upturned urinal, which he then anonymously submitted for exhibition under the pseudonym "Richard Mutt." Again, the reaction of the hanging committee to the submission repeats the response of the viewer in the Lenin joke: "where", they ask, "is the 'Fountain' designated by the title?" What clearly triggers the excessive reaction is the name inscribed in black paint on the white porcelain: without the name, the object is no more than a urinal turned on its head. Through this explicit inscription—made even more obvious by the label tied to the side of the urinal—Duchamp makes it clear that the name does not designate representational content; rather, it is part of the field of representation as the element that holds the place of what is lacking in this field, namely, the "Fountain." In short, through such an act of naming Duchamp foregrounds *naming as an act* and shows how, it is ultimately as an effect of the signifier's workings that the urinal becomes something *more than a urinal*: it is elevated to the status of a *Fountain*, an everyday object invested with the dignity of a work of art.

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Duchampian appellation; Žižekian interpellation

Žižek, from his specific psychoanalytic perspective, considers naming in terms of its broader social-symbolic texture as a ritualistic, meaning-making activity which constitutes the zero level of collectivized belief. The act of appellation is thus understood to function as a strategic operation insofar as it is the fundamental bedrock of ideological interpellation—a performative gesture that situates its bearer as “subject.” To grasp this point, one must first note how, due to the radical contingency of naming—the fundamental emptiness of the word, the “dogmatic stupidity” of the signifier—the field of intersubjective communication is penetrated by a fundamental deadlock: if language, at its most basic level, is devoid of all enunciated content then how is meaning transmitted? For Žižek, such an obstacle is overcome through a collective “leap of faith” on the part of the community of subjects who speak a particular language: a mutual presupposition on the part of two speakers—what he calls a structurally necessary “salto mortale”—that they both mean the same thing when they say certain words. In other words, all speakers must posit an imaginary horizon of meanings and rules which legitimizes and governs their individual speech acts. Given that the word is first and foremost an empty reflexive marker, the only reason we know that we all mean the

same thing when we speak certain words is, according to Žižek, because we “act as if we do”:

The “leap of faith” is necessary and productive (enabling communication) precisely insofar as it is a counterfactual fiction: its “truth effect,” its positive role of enabling communication, hinges precisely on the fact that it is not true, that it jumps ahead into fiction—its status is not normative because it cuts the debilitating deadlock of language, because of its ultimate lack of guarantee, by presenting what we should strive for as already accomplished.¹⁷

The tautological dimension of the act of naming is governed by a performative operation undertaken by the speakers of the language itself: the “as if fiction” or “leap of faith” which sustains the consistency of the field of communication. It is in this performative dimension, Žižek argues, that the act of belief appears in its purest form. His basic theoretical point is that the zero-level function of belief is located, not in the presupposition of some imaginary content, but in the very act of obscuring the inconsistency or deadlock that penetrates the field; that is, the stupidity of the signifier, the radical contingency of naming. In short, it is in the reflexive, performative nature of the activity itself—not the content presupposed—that belief operates. This is why Žižek insists on what he calls the “objective” status of belief: “belief,” he writes, “is not

¹⁷ Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, 222-223.

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something “interior” but “is radically exterior, embodied in the practical, effective procedure of people.”¹⁸

It is in capitalism, Žižek maintains, that the objective status of belief is most obvious: everyone knows that money is no more than a physical, material substance subject to deterioration over time; however, in order to engage in the act of exchange we must overlook this fact by collectively presupposing that the physical substance has universal value; although *we know* that money is not inherently valuable, in the “social effectivity” of our activity we nevertheless continue to *act as if* it is. Ultimately, it is by presupposing that money is invested with an ineffable quality, present in the material from the beginning as its immanent essence, that we come to treat it as such. In this way, the mysterious aura of the commodity form—its fascinating dimension, its status as a fetish—is supported and sustained by a postulate: a collective leap of faith on the part of all those within the field, a performative appeal to the irrational authority governing the field of the subject’s activity.¹⁹

This, according to Žižek, is how the objective status of belief—the belief operative in the activity of individuals—sustains the fabric of the social space (i.e. the field of economic exchange). He thus defines belief as a constitutive blindness which cannot be directly acknowledged or confronted because to do

¹⁸ Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

so would dissolve the consistency of the field, the legitimacy of the activity. It is on the basis of this assertion that his radical notion of ideological interpellation emerges:

Ideology is not simply a “false consciousness,” an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as “ideological”—“ideological” is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence [...] Ideological is not the “false consciousness” of a (social being) but this being itself insofar as it is supported by false consciousness.²⁰

Ideology, in short, *has nothing to do with ideas*; on the contrary, the fundamental dimension of ideological interpellation is located not at the level of knowledge—what *we think* we are doing—but in the *form* of the activity — what *we are actually doing*: in the objective belief which sustains “the effective functioning” of a given ideological field.²¹ This is why the true aim of ideological interpellation—of positioning individuals as ideological subjects—is to prevent the texture of an ideological edifice from disintegrating by maintaining the consistency of the objective belief that supports it.²²

It is within the parameters of this conceptual apparatus that Duchamp’s work acquires new meaning on a socio-ideological plane. As a work of art, the “Nude” can be viewed as a commodity-form: the mystical aura it exerts—the excessive dimension produced by its title—is, on the whole, governed and

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

²² *Ibid.*

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sustained by the belief operative in the activity of those within the field. It is this constitutive blindness which was ultimately exposed when Duchamp submitted the “Nude” to the Salon des Indépendants: by distorting the structure of the Cubist art-form—by breaking the illusion that sustained its fascinating dimension—Duchamp cast light on the leap of faith which governs this structure. More precisely, by foregrounding the radical contingency of naming—the empty, metaphorical status of the title, the “stupidity” of the signifier—he openly staged the performative operation that obscures the deadlock this emptiness provokes: namely, the objective belief which sustains the consistency of the closed Cubist group.

Duchamp directly criticized this group when he noted how “Cubism had only lasted two or three years, and they already had an absolutely clear, dogmatic line on it, foreseeing everything that might happen. I found that naively foolish.”²³ Crucially, it is not the ideological content—the principles of Puteaux Cubism—that he rejects as dogmatic; on the contrary, it is the activity itself which is foolish: how, despite their “avant-garde” claims, the Cubist movement remained entrenched within the structure of the aesthetic field. Although, at the level of knowledge, they declare themselves to be free of all academic convention, the rejection of the “Nude” proves that, in the *effectivity of their activity*, they remain guided by a constitutive blindness.

²³ Duchamp, *Dialogues*, 17.

This is why the “Nude” could be said to render visible the fundamental ideological dimension of modern art: the fact that the avant-garde logic of provocation was no more than what Duchamp calls a “little revolutionary temple.”²⁴ One might argue then that, in Žižekian terms, Duchamp reduces the aesthetic field to: “[...] a kind of reality which is possible only on the condition that the individuals partaking in it are not aware of its proper logic; that is, a kind of reality whose very ontological consistency implies a certain non-knowledge of its participants.”²⁵ This is why, in the Puteaux group’s response to the “Nude,” we witness the ideological edifice in action: the reaffirmation of a set of presupposed principles as a means of obscuring the fundamental dimension of the belief operative in the activity.

It is with Duchamp’s “Fountain” that the internal workings of this ideological mechanism become foregrounded. As with the “Nude,” the reduction of the title to the status of empty name exposes the act of belief which obscures this emptiness, the ideological operation that sustains the structure of the field. Like the Puteaux Cubists, the “Society of Independent Artists” which rejected the work claimed to be free of all academic doctrine—they said that any artist paying six dollars may exhibit. By exposing the contradiction inherent in this position, Duchamp highlighted the blindness

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁵ Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 14.

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which still governed avant-garde activity, the fact that those within the field remained entrenched in academic doctrine: although they *knew* that the work of art could not be defined by any strict aesthetic criteria, in what they were doing they continued to define the work of art according to strict aesthetic criteria; namely, the very “grounds” for their refusal of the “Fountain.”

The important point to be repeated is that the ideological dimension exposed by the “Fountain” was operative not in the principles governing the rejection but in *the act of rejection itself*: the way the refusal functions as a means of obscuring the objective belief which sustains the consistency of the field, the reflexive/performative dimension of the activity. It is in this way that the ideological edifice (the aesthetic field) sustains its consistency through the preservation of the ideological attitude (the aesthetic judgment).

Is it not with the subsequent “postmodern” interpretation of the “Fountain” that this mechanism is openly staged? By reading the work as a challenge to institutional modernism, a gesture of provocation which exposes the avant-garde’s disavowed assumptions (i.e. a “readymade”), one falls into the very trap one claims to escape: through the very act of interpreting the “Fountain” as an object of conceptual art, one obscures the fundamental deadlock it exposes; by reading the work as a critique of specific aesthetic principles (ideological content) we have missed how it renders visible the foundations of the aesthetic field (as an ideological edifice).

It is clear from the content of the editorial publication which followed “Fountain’s” rejection that the work undermines the consistency in the Independent’s stance; however, it is at the level of text’s form—in our own act of reading-interpreting the editorial—that the precise ideological dimension of the rejection can be seen to repeat itself. With the postmodern interpretation, we acknowledge that art cannot be defined according to a set of dogmatic principles; and yet, in our activity, *this is exactly what we have done*: in judging the “Fountain” as an object of conceptual art—that is, in the act of *naming* it a “readymade”—we define art in terms of the same fundamental principles which supported the Independents stance: we repeat the original response to the work by simply shifting the grounds for refusal into the grounds for elevation: *the dismissal of the work as an everyday object becomes the elevation of the work to the level of conceptual art.*²⁶

In both cases, the sublime structure of the work of art remains in place; the fundamental co-ordinates of the aesthetic field remain untouched.²⁷ We

²⁶ A more expansive and nuanced analysis of this operation can be found in Robert Kilroy, “Re-Framing the Real: Duchamp’s Readymade as a Lacanian Object,” in *Preservation, Radicalism and the Avant-Garde Canon*, ed. by Rebecca Ferreboeuf, Fiona Noble, and Tara Plunkett (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

²⁷ While a full elaboration of this point is beyond the scope of this paper, it is sufficient to note the obvious contradiction in the established reading of Duchamp’s “Fountain”: the fact that it is impossible to read the work as postmodern—as a critique of institutional modernism, a challenge to its academic protocol through original, stylistic subversion—without presupposing the fundamental principles of modernism: “institutional critique,” “challenge to academic protocol through stylistic originality/subversion.”

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can thus reassess the established reading of Duchamp's "readymade" on the basis of Žižek's claim that the "enlightened" post-ideological (post-modern) consciousness has never been more entrenched in ideology: although, at the level of knowledge, our postmodern evaluation of the readymade takes into account "the distance between the ideological mask and the reality," in our actual activity (at the level of practice) we "still finds reason to retain the mask."²⁸

Approaching the knot from the other side, we might therefore ask: how does Duchamp's work allow us to reassess Žižek's notion of ideology? What is fundamentally at stake in objective belief, Žižek explains, is the logic of the master signifier—the radical contingency of naming—in its social form. In the performative dimension of our activity we refer to an irrational authority in order to guarantee the legitimacy of this activity. This nonsensical form is the empty name in relation to which we reflexively position ourselves as ideological subjects. This is why, for Žižek, "the crucial step in the analysis of an ideological edifice" is ultimately identification of the empty master signifier which holds the fabric of a field in place: "to detect, behind the dazzling splendour of the element which holds it together ('God', 'Country', 'Class'...),

²⁸ Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 28.

this self-referential, tautological, performative operation.”²⁹ In short, by exposing the objective status of belief, the critique of ideology ultimately grounds the “dogmatic stupidity” of the signifier as it is operative in the social field.

The problem, however, is that Žižek’s approach to ideology critique does not seem to follow its own clearly defined methodology: Žižek, in short, does not perform the operation he calls for. It is, I claim, only by short-circuiting Žižek through Duchamp that we can go further than Žižek himself in localizing the precise status of the master signifier.³⁰ The important question to ask is this: if the mystical aura exerted by a commodity form or art-form is governed and sustained by the belief operative in the activity of those within the field, then what is the precise irrational authority or “nonsensical impossibility”³¹ to which such ideological subjects refer?

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁰ That is to say, through Duchamp we isolate the master signifier which Žižek fails to recognize. The argument elaborated in my doctoral dissertation is that the word “Art,” through its integration into the Kantian system of thought and the subsequent expansion of this system as the dominant ideological edifice of late-capitalism (where it now operates as the set of principles legitimizing our everyday “creative” engagement with digital media), is the fundamental master-signifier of our times, the point of symbolic identification in what Alain Badiou terms today’s “worldless universe”. The reason, I claim, that Žižek fails to see what, in the Duchampian field, appears as the purest demonstration of his thought is because he too—due to the aforementioned limitation in his position—is a prisoner of the Kantian field.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

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An answer appears when we return to Duchamp's remarks on the "Nude" and consider their broader context. What causes the work to acquire a mystical aura, he explains, is the discourse of judgment that surrounds it: "an object is an object, a three-dimensional form, but words are taken and repeated."³² In other words, it is in the activity of judging an everyday object a work of art—of repeatedly acting "as if" the physical substance is invested with some immutable essence—that objective belief functions; the judgment is sustained and legitimized by a postulate, the presupposition that the word "Art" signifies some sort of universal value. It is in this self-referential, performative operation that we can isolate the tautological element which holds the entire field together: behind the "dazzling splendour" of the word "Art" is "art," the empty name. As Duchamp himself puts it: "it's very curious because it's one of these words that has no meaning to begin with [...] and after a certain number of repetitions the word takes on an aura of mysticism and magic."³³

Is it not this very tautological element—"art" *qua* empty name—which becomes isolated in both the rejection and elevation of the "Fountain"? As has been noted, in the original submission the inscription in black paint provokes the same reaction as that described in Žižek's "Lenin joke." This time, however,

³² Duchamp, *The Afternoon Interviews*, 62.

³³ *Ibid.*, 62.

the “title” exposed as a pure signifier is the one located in the broader structure of the field: the question “where is the object designated by the title?” doubles up on a social-ideological level as: “is this *art*? what is *Art*?” Just like the Lenin joke (“Where is Lenin?”), we can see that the question is its own answer: “where is Art?” isolates the name which holds the place of what is lacking in the field, as the condition for the emergence of the field itself. The only answer to such a question, one might argue, is the tautological statement “*art is art*” in which the effect of a “signifying repetition” signals that the thing (the work of art) doesn’t fit its own concept (art). Such a statement underlines the performative (metaphorical) dimension of the word “art” itself while, at the same time, generating “the spectre of an ineffable X beyond words.”³⁴

Through this reduction of the word “art” to an empty name, the master signifier to which the ideological subject—the individual interpellated as subject of an aesthetic attitude—refers in his activity is exposed: “art” is the reflexive marker whose illogical status must be sustained if the texture of the aesthetic field is to be preserved. Once again, it is in the postmodern interpretation of the “Fountain” that this point becomes explicit: if one reads the editorial without performing the structurally necessary “leap of faith”—that is, if one reads the text without adopting an aesthetic attitude which reflexively refers to the name “art”—it becomes clear that the word itself only

³⁴ Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, London: Verso, 2010, 68.

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appears once, as a particular name emptied of all designated aesthetic content (“art” only is used once in the text in the context of architectural construction and plumbing).³⁵ It is this fact which is completely overlooked when the work is judged as an object of conceptual art; the status of “art” *qua* empty name—its “dogmatic stupidity”—is obscured when, in reading the text, we elevate the particular word to a universal position: to the level of the signifier “Art,” that nonsensical authority which supports the consistency of our field and guarantees the legitimacy of our activity.

It is with this that we come full circle and return to the *Palazzo Venier dei Leoni* in Venice, to the precise “poetic” effect produced by the band of interns playfully concealing objects on walls with a veil of mysticism and magic. While they may gather in the name of “art” they nevertheless continue to engage in a ritual which belies the terms of their gathering: a collective leap of faith which, in spite of the edifice which sustains it, the pure performativity of the process renders palpable.

Robert Kilroy received his Ph. D. from Trinity College Dublin in 2015. His doctoral thesis, entitled *Marcel Duchamp: Resolving the Word/Image Problematic*,

³⁵ For an elaboration of this point see Kilroy, “Re-Framing the Real.”

afterthought, attempts to radically re-evaluate the writings and art-works of the French artist Marcel Duchamp from the perspective of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. In bringing together Duchamp with Lacan, Kilroy gives a central role to the philosopher, psychoanalyst and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek, whose work he critically re-examines. While his research interests fall within the field of French Studies and between the disciplines of Psychoanalysis and Art History, Kilroy also engages with the fields of Visual and Digital Culture. He is a regular contributor to *Lacunae*, an International Journal for Freudian and Lacanian Psychoanalysis, and his research on Duchamp forms part an upcoming Palgrave MacMillan publication entitled *Preservation, Radicalism and the Avant-Garde Canon*.

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