

24 Lee Krasner

Bald Eagle, 1955

Lee Krasner was a central figure of Abstract Expressionism. She trained in the late 1930s with Hans Hofmann, the German painter whose teaching transmitted many of the principles of Modernist abstraction to the New York painters. She was employed on the Federal Art Project and in 1936 met Jackson Pollock, whom she was to marry in 1945. Early accounts of her career emphasized the extent to which she was 'overshadowed' by Pollock. Her work is now beginning to be examined in its own terms.



'Robert Rauschenberg'. This added a twist to the denial of authorial 'presence' in his earlier *White Paintings*.

However, this gesture symbolically effaced not just the 'paternal' signature but also something of the heterosexual masculinity attaching to it. Although briefly married at the start of the 1950s, Rauschenberg had come to recognize that his sexual orientation was bisexual. The social climate was hardly conducive to this. McCarthyism explicitly correlated homosexuality with Communism to the extent that, during

The masculine exclusivity of Abstract Expressionism is made especially clear when considering the effects it had on female artists attempting to work within it. The case of Jackson Pollock's wife, Lee Krasner, is particularly interesting here. The art historian Anne Wagner has shown that, during the height of Pollock's fame in the late 1940s, her response to his work, the so-called *Little Images* of 1946–9, involved a deliberate muting of his painterly heroics, a kind of self-abnegation necessitated paradoxically by the need to *preserve* her sense of self. (At the time she apparently worked in the cramped conditions of a converted bedroom, whilst Pollock occupied the main studio in their home.)

In the year before Pollock's premature death, Krasner made powerful collages, possibly drawing on the huge semi-abstract 'paper-cuts' that the veteran French Modernist Henri Matisse was producing around this time. In one of these collages she made use of off-cuts from her husband's canvases, as if rehearsing the problematics of retaining a separable identity [24]. Later on, at the end of the 1950s, she ironically allowed herself to develop the kind of expansive Abstract Expressionist style she had earlier needed to suppress. The upshot of this account is to show that, as in earlier instances in twentieth-century art, the structural position of female artists, as underwritten by socially and culturally determined frameworks of male–female relations, frequently placed female practitioners in a position of compromise with regard to career interests. This situation was naturally exacerbated, and made acutely vivid, when, like Krasner and Pollock, the artists were married.

its purges, more homosexuals than Communists ended up losing their jobs in the Federal government. In 1954, the young painter Jasper Johns replaced Twombly as Rauschenberg's artistic ally. This was simultaneously the beginning of a romantic relationship between them which, given the sexual mores of the period, quite apart from Abstract Expressionism's obligatory masculinism, would only be expressed through a highly coded pictorial syntax. Duchamp's use of oblique bodily metaphor and authorial indeterminacy again provided a model here. But it was to be Jasper Johns who followed it most closely.

Metaphors of sexual identity: Jasper Johns

Johns's earliest works, which are veritable icons of postwar art, appeared *sui generis*, the artist having destroyed much of his preceding output. He acquired critical success when the art dealer Leo Castelli, invited by Rauschenberg to their shared studio, bought up his entire production, exhibiting it, before Rauschenberg's, in early 1958. Looking at images such as *Target with Plaster Casts* and *Flag* of 1954–5 [26, 28], it is apparent that, quite apart from inheriting Rauschenberg's dissolution of painting/object distinctions via the use of 'readymade' subject-matter, Johns's use of compartments in the former owes something to Cornell. His use of public emblems has a more esoteric source in earlier American artists such as Marsden Hartley and Charles Demuth. The latter's painting *I Saw the Number 5 in Gold* of 1928 was essayed in Johns's *Number 5* (1955) and later numbers pictures [29].

25 Marcel Duchamp

Belle Haleine, Eau de Voilette,
1921

The text on the label punningly translates as 'beautiful breath/veil water'. Duchamp's female alter ego, Rose Sélavy, peers out from above it.



Hartley and Demuth had both been homosexuals, and the latter an associate of Duchamp in the New York Dada days. From this Johns's identification with a specific artistic lineage becomes clear. Among Duchamp's strangest gestures had been the creation of a female alter ego, Rose Sélavy (a verbal pun on 'Eros, c'est la vie'). This figure, whose visual manifestations consisted of photographs by the American artist Man Ray of Duchamp in drag, appeared on the label of the perfume bottle *Belle Haleine/Eau de voilette* [25]. A Dada skit on the cosmetics/hygiene industry, this was simultaneously a succinct formulation of Duchamp's understanding of art as (feminized) consumption as opposed to (masculinized) production, as later exemplified by the *Boîte-en-Valise*. Duchamp's sexuality, whilst ostensibly heterosexual,

was obviously put into question by this gesture. At the same time, his dandyish persona, involving an aristocratic disdain for what he deemed the 'splashy' side of painting, to say nothing of its retinal associations, won him many gay sympathizers.

In *Target with Plaster Casts* [26] Johns seems subtly to have invoked Duchamp. This painting/sculpture sets up a perceptual/conceptual interplay between an 'exposed' (but numberless) target below and a set of closeable boxes above containing casts of body parts, which, in certain cases, such as that of the green-painted penis third from right, blatantly signify as 'male'. The allusion seems to be to the Bachelors firing their 'shots' at the Bride in the *Large Glass* [55]. More broadly the imagery may dramatize the insecurity of gay identity at a time when homosexuality was virulently proscribed, mobilizing metaphors of sexual 'outing' and 'closeting' or invoking social 'targeting', as symbolized by the fragmented body parts. In spite of its reticence, it appears to speak volumes about a society obsessed with fantasmatic inner demons and their expulsion. This relates it to Rauschenberg's *Bed* [19] as discussed earlier, and reprises the apocalyptic urgency of the Beat writers, several of whom were gay.

A more intriguing Duchampian parallel is with *Etant Donnés* which, as explained, involved directing the spectator's vision not at a male but at a female sexual organ. Johns must have been aware that, late in 1953, Duchamp had exhibited an enigmatic cast of a body part in New York entitled *Female Fig Leaf*, a 'positive' cast obtained from the pudenda of the 'nude' in *Etant Donnés*. It is unlikely that he knew of Duchamp's secret work on the installation, although John Cage, who was close to both Rauschenberg and Johns, may have known something of it. However, Johns appears to have tracked Duchamp's thought like a detective. Although he did not meet his spiritual mentor until 1959 (the year, incidentally, when the first book on Duchamp, by Robert Lebel, was published) he could have divined a great deal from the 1940s edition of *View* mentioned earlier. In 1954 much of Duchamp's output, assembled by the collector Walter Arensberg, went on show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

If *Target with Plaster Casts* does indeed transpose the dynamics of gendered looking from the *Large Glass* and *Etant Donnés* into homoerotic terms, a coda to this dialogue is provided by a slightly later work of art. The American sculptor Robert Morris's *I-Box* of 1962 [27] was produced at a yet further stage in the iconographic unravelling of Duchamp. The latter's notes for his *Large Glass* were now available in English (the translation came out in 1960) whilst Johns's *Target*, an echo of a work as yet invisible to the art community, could be construed as virtually predicting the trajectory of Duchamp's activities. In his voyeuristic *I-Box* Morris surely had the boxes at the top of Johns's *Target* in mind, but their fragmented contents were seemingly recon-



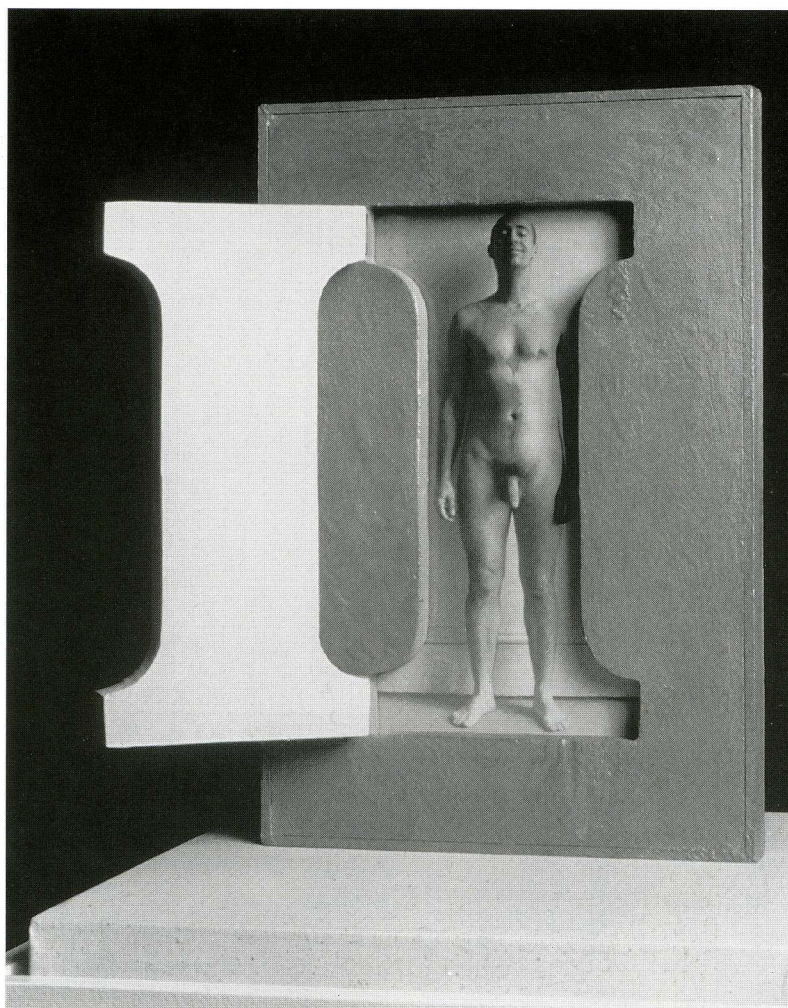
26 Jasper Johns

Target with Plaster Casts,
1955

27 Robert Morris

I-Box, 1962

Here Morris presented a small rectangular structure with a door shaped as a letter 'I'. When opened the door gave on to a photograph of the artist, his phallus rhyming with the 'I' connotative both of the viewers' looking (eye) and the artist's identity.



stituted in the image of a self-confident and possibly heterosexual male. The latter point is made tentatively since much depends on the sexual orientations Morris imagined himself addressing. And, whilst *I-Box* appears to reverse the terms of *Etant Donnés*, to what extent may the latter, materializing slowly elsewhere, have responded to Morris or Johns? There is no clear historical resolution to any of this. What is clear, though, is the sheer elasticity of the gender metaphors Duchamp put into play.

The aesthetics of indifference

The Duchampian model also appealed to Johns, as it did to Rauschenberg, for its anti-Modernist potential. Once again, de Kooning becomes pivotal here. His return to the figure in the early 1950s [23], a return paralleled in the work of numerous contemporaries

28 Jasper Johns

Flag, 1954–5

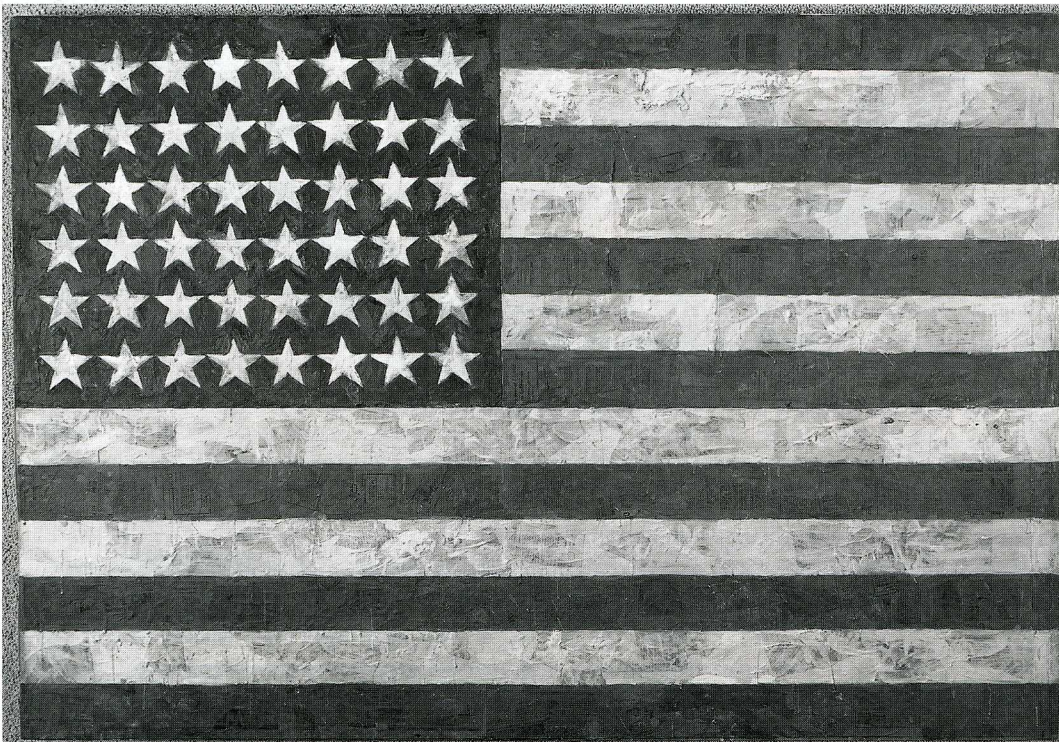
29 Jasper Johns

Numbers, 1966

Johns used letters or numbers as a means of reintroducing the signifiers of a collective sign system into a Modernist 'field' previously answerable to subjective judgements of taste. The textures in his drawings in particular are subtly modulated. In this example he has overlayed a metallic powder wash over a graphite wash to produce a hint of colour.

dubious about the faith Newman or Rothko placed in abstraction's ability to embody 'content', was seen by Modernist critics, notably Greenberg, as a failure of aesthetic nerve. Greenberg eventually coined the poetic phrase 'homeless representation' to describe de Kooning's adaptation of 'descriptive painterliness ... to abstract ends'.¹⁷

Looking at Johns's *Flag* [28], in which the American flag is taken as the 'subject' for a painting/collage, one sees his response to the discontents brewing in the Greenberg camp. Quite simply, it is impossible here to separate out the representational 'content' of the image from its insistence on functioning as a flatly 'abstract' Modernist painting. The paradox is set up by Johns's use of a pre-designed, two-dimensional sign as his subject. He would subsequently move on to making use of letters and numbers, generically described by him as 'things the mind already knows'. Such entities might be thought to have some substantial 'existence', but in fact hover somewhere between physical and conceptual states. They are, in this sense, 'homeless'. Johns therefore established that it *was* possible to make 'homeless' representations, subtly pre-empting Greenberg's difficulty with late Abstract Expressionism, although hardly, in terms of his banal subject-matter, endorsing de Kooning.



If *Flag* reintroduced a kind of phantom-like conceptual 'subject-matter' into the Modernist painterly 'field', while simultaneously preserving the 'all-over' integrity of it, Johns further ironized matters by supplying the image with an encaustic 'skin'. As with other paintings by Johns of this period, *Flag* utilised an unusual technique in which encaustic (pigment mixed with hot wax) was laid over a base of torn newspaper fragments. The use of a painterly medium which quickly solidified as the wax cooled ensured that the autographic mark was effectively frozen before it could achieve its full expansiveness.

Johns would have been aware that chance was one of Duchamp's principal means of short-circuiting his aesthetic habits, or introducing curbs on his expressivity. Duchamp had, for instance, permitted dust to build up on the lower section of his *Large Glass* [18] to determine part of its colouration (indeed the *Glass* in its entirety became for Duchamp a 'delay in glass' rather than a consolidated art object). It seems, then, that Johns also used a principle of 'delay' to interrogate the spontaneity of the Abstract Expressionist mark. In a painted construction of 1960 entitled *Painting with Two Balls*, this critique was allied to a scornful disdain for Abstract Expressionism's masculinism. Two small wooden balls were inserted into a gap manfully prising apart a canvas filled with embalmed painterly gestures. Johns thereby communicated an anxiety that, at any minute, the Modernist 'field' might snap shut.

A further point occurs in relation to *Flag*: this is the evident sense of concealment arising from the use of a newspaper base. Here and there suggestive bits of newspaper show through the encaustic as though contemporary events were metaphorically being screened out.¹⁸ Given that 1950s America was obsessed with concealment and exposure, Johns's procedures seem entirely apt. It is revealing, though, that Johns replicated the social evasions of the period when, in later interviews, he accounted for the genesis of *Flag*. He said that the idea for it came to him 'in a dream', as though downplaying his volition and relegating its origins to the unconscious, the province of Surrealism. This might seem disingenuous. The American flag could hardly have been more charged with political significance than it was at the height of the Cold War, and Johns's work appears to encode a mute ambivalence towards its authority. However, the flag was surely an active symbol in the 'collective' or 'national' unconscious. This generates precisely the kind of ambiguity regarding his artistic intentions that Johns relished.

Johns's indeterminate position with respect to the imposition of aesthetic or social readings from the outside has been shown by the art historian Moira Roth to arise from an 'aesthetics of indifference' uniting Johns, Rauschenberg, and John Cage. Unlike Abstract Expressionists such as Newman or Motherwell, these artists' fascination with Duchamp's dandyism predisposed them to avoid overt political alignments.¹⁹ The sheer ambiguity cultivated by Johns in this

respect is exemplified by a series of works from the late 1950s onward in which innocuous sequences of numbers were put through a series of painted and drawn variations [29]. The sequences were stepped such that they read horizontally, diagonally, and often vertically. They thus replaced the arbitrary subjectivity embodied in the Abstract Expressionist painted surface with a self-evidently 'logical' means of getting from one side of the pictorial field to the other. With such a system in place, Johns paradoxically freed himself to work around the numbers, courting the picture surface as devotedly as de Kooning. Roth emphasizes, however, that one could easily see the numbers as obliquely keyed to McCarthyism. Numerical sequences often acquired occult significance in the trials for spying, where 'codes were constantly on the verge of being cracked'.²⁰ It becomes clear that the numbers resist being counted, so to speak, on either interpretative side. They work, as Fred Orton has said of *Flag*, precisely 'in the space of difference', failing to confirm either one reading or another.²¹

There were, however, flickers of overt political comment in the larger artistic environment in New York. It tends to be overlooked that in 1953 another painter concerned with realigning subject-matter with abstraction, Larry Rivers, produced a small critical storm with his *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Painted in an irresolute, sketch-like manner, it loosely referred to a kitsch, academic icon of patriotism of the same title produced by Emanuel Leutze in 1851. This episode demonstrates that not all avant-garde practice in this period projected a paralysis of political will. Although figurative and more conservative formally than Johns's work, Rivers's image conveyed a polemical disrespect for a picture which was ubiquitous in America's schoolrooms.

It also gets overlooked that Duchamp, however aloof from worldly affairs he appeared, had similarly produced a work on the subject of George Washington. This was a collage entitled *Allégorie de genre* which *Vogue* magazine solicited for a competition to produce a cover portrait of George Washington for their 'Americana' edition of February 1943. Duchamp's solution conjured the images of Washington's profile and a map of America from a section of shrivelled bandage gauze. This had been stained with iodine, to evoke dual connotations of wounds and the stripes of the American flag, and studded with a scattering of disconsolate fake stars. Given that the gesture appeared to reflect on America's entry into the Second World War, it was, unsurprisingly, rejected. Duchamp, it seems, had come too uncomfortably close to anti-patriotism for the America that was eventually to adopt him as its own (he took up citizenship in 1947). Johns may easily have seen Duchamp's collage since it was reproduced in *VVV*, an American Surrealist magazine, in 1944. Perhaps Johns forgot it. Twelve years later his *Flag* painting embalmed criticism of the State in ambiguities.

Readymades and replications

In 1960, as part of a then ongoing sequence of small-scaled sculptures, Johns produced *Painted Bronze (Ale Cans)*, in which casts taken from two beer cans appear on a plinth. This represented a new phase in Johns's reception of Duchamp, which now centred more squarely on the implications of the 'readymades'. Rauschenberg and, to a lesser degree, Larry Rivers had long ago ushered commodified imagery into art, reflecting America's postwar consumer boom, but Johns's beer cans were more essentially esoteric. By succinctly turning the readymade or mass-produced back into art, as symbolized both by the 'pedestal' on which the objects stood and by the utilization of the time-honoured sculptural process of bronze casting, Johns raised conceptual conundrums about the relationship between uniqueness and sameness. This is further dramatized by the way that the labels of the twinned objects were hand-painted to emphasize differences between them. In addition, one of the cast cans was 'opened' whilst the other remained 'sealed'.

Such gestures were seemingly reciprocated by Duchamp's own attention to issues surrounding readymades and replication in the 1960s. Showing some annoyance with the recent cult for 'Neo-Dada', he wrote, in 1962, to an old Dada ally, Hans Richter, complaining about the aestheticizing of his readymades. They had, he asserted, been

30 Sherrie Levine

Fountain / After Marcel Duchamp, 1991

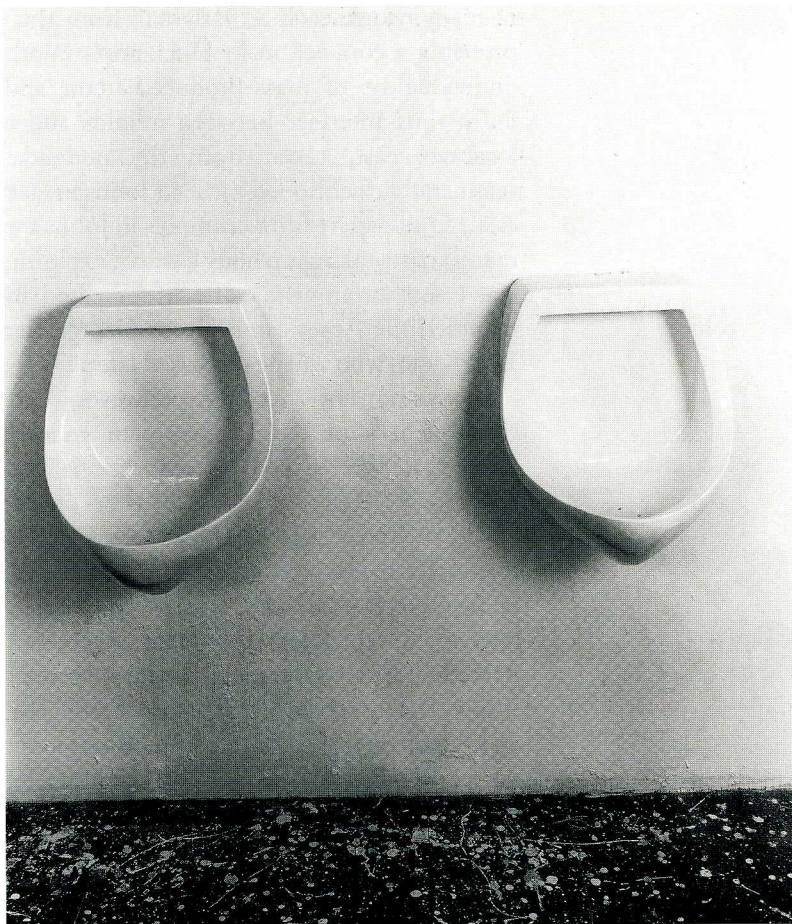
Levine had pursued her dialogue with Duchamp in another direction in an installation of 1989 at Mary Boone's New York gallery entitled *The Bachelors (After Marcel Duchamp)*. Small frosted-glass versions of the Bachelors from Duchamp's *Large Glass* [18] were placed in a series of vitrines. Duchamp had conceived of his Bachelors as 'moulds' waiting to be filled. By transposing his diagrammatic prototypes into three-dimensional terms, Levine poignantly emphasized their 'emptiness' and isolation.



31 Robert Gober

Two Urinals, 1986

These highly stylized, non-utilitarian versions of plumbing fixtures evoke complex psycho-sexual concerns surrounding issues of hygiene and male bonding. At the same time, they participate in a witty dialogue with Jasper Johns's famous bronze cast of two ale cans, *Painted Bronze*, of 1960. Johns's cans themselves referred both to Duchamp and to the macho drinking culture of Abstract Expressionism. Gober thus brings an entire dialogue concerning male social/artistic camaraderie full circle.



thrown into the public's face in a spirit of defiance. However much interpreters felt he had 'elevated' everyday objects to the status of art, he now declared that the readymades had been selected in a spirit of absolute indifference. Their whole anti-aesthetic rationale turned on the fact that they lacked 'uniqueness'.²² He may well have been reformulating past attitudes here to keep ahead of developments around him. However, questions relating to the paradoxical 'originality' and 'reproducibility' of the readymades had preoccupied him earlier. In a series of notes of the 1930s on a pseudo-scientific category called 'infra-thin' he had speculated, in almost metaphysical fashion, on infinitesimal differences or thresholds between physical states. One example reads: 'The difference / (dimensional) between / 2 mass produced objects / [from the same mould] is an 'infra thin'.²³ Without knowledge of this note, Johns paralleled it with his cans.

Duchamp pushed the consequences of reproducibility to a perverse conclusion when, in 1964, he authorized the Galleria Schwarz in Milan to produce limited editions (of eight signed and numbered copies) of

14 readymades, each an 'original' from the same mould. There was probably a connection in Duchamp's mind here between the ironic 'individuality' of mass-produced items and other examples of the 'infra-thin' interface between moulds and casts such as the strange 'positive' cast, taken from the pudenda of the *Etant Donnés* mannequin, mentioned earlier. (Johns in fact acquired a version of this cast.) Quite apart from examples in Johns's work, the 1960s was to see many artists taking up body casting, exploiting all the poignant indexical traces or imprints of 'life' created by such processes. These included the American sculptor George Segal and the French artist Yves Klein, who will be discussed later.

It was not until the 1980s, however, that artists registered the full consequences of the Duchampian concern with replication. The American Sherrie Levine, who specialized in 'appropriating' pre-existing works of art by male 'Masters', made subtly ironic comments on the in-house 'masculinism' of the Duchampian tradition by 'feminizing' its imagery. In 1991 she produced a whole series of urinals with polished bronze surfaces, wittily re-enacting Johns's translation of the readymade principle back into art. At the same time she made sophisticated allusions to the polished modernist sculptures of Constantin Brancusi, whose work Duchamp had helped sell, thereby projecting a combined aura of sex and commercial gloss onto what now seemed a rather dour 'original' urinal [30]. Another 1980s artist, Robert Gober, produced a sculpture of two urinals side by side [31]. The fact that Gober's imagery often alluded to homosexuality had the effect of reclaiming Duchamp for masculinity, but a masculinity, of course, closer to that of artists such as Duchamp's arch-mediator, Jasper Johns, whose twinned ale cans Gober echoed.

Such metaphorical fine-tunings to the tradition of the readymade have turned into a rather monotonous end-game. Perhaps, more sympathetically, the process could be linked to the notion of 'genre'. In Holland over the course of the seventeenth century, still life came to be constituted as a genre, a category of subject-matter which painters could knowingly manipulate. The tradition of the readymade may have analogies. But the larger agendas set for postwar art by Duchamp, such as the concern with the 'gendered' relation between the object and the spectator or the probing of the relationship between the 'original' and the 'replica', hardly constitute genres in certain fundamental respects. They are not attached to specific kinds of objects, subjects, or techniques. Instead they rely on the dynamics of conceptual innovation. It is in this elusive area, resistant to conventional aesthetic criteria, that Duchamp had the greatest historical impact.