

Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*: Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917

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Duchamp's *Fountain* has become one of the most famous/infamous objects in the history of modern art (Fig. 1). The literature on it—counting references imbedded in broader considerations of Duchamp's work—is staggering in quantity, and one might suppose that little more of consequence could be discovered. But an examination of this literature reveals that our knowledge of this readymade sculpture and its history is riddled with gaps and extraordinary conflicts of memory, interpretation, and criticism. We are not even able to consult the object itself, since it disappeared early on, and we have no idea what happened to it. Duchamp said Walter Arensberg purchased *Fountain* and later lost it. Clark Marlor, author of recent publications on the Society of Independent Artists, claims it was broken by William Glackens. Others reported it as hidden or stolen.¹ We do not even know with absolute certainty that Duchamp was the artist—he himself once attributed it to a female friend—and some of his comments raise fundamental questions regarding his intentions in this readymade. But most critics have not been troubled by these conflicting comments from Duchamp or by the lacunae in our knowledge. Some deny that *Fountain* is art but believe it is significant for the history of art and aesthetics. Others accept it grudgingly as art but deny that it is significant. To complete the circle, some insist *Fountain* is neither art nor an object of historical consequence, while a few assert that it is both art and significant—though for utterly incompatible reasons.

In light of these diverse viewpoints I shall attempt to reconstruct what we know about *Fountain* based on documents at the time of its appearance in 1917 and consideration of relevant historical circumstances.²

Given the remarkable interrelationships in Duchamp's work from beginning to end, an obvious risk is involved in any study that focuses on a single object. However, *Fountain* will not be entirely isolated from the rest of his *oeuvre*, and the results of this more narrowly focused study will contribute to the whole.

I am indebted to many individuals and earlier studies. Some of the information and ideas to be presented here are not new, but I have expanded that information, ordered, focused, and flavored it with a personal bias. Indeed, this study is the long-suppressed gratification of a desire which arose in the late 1960s when, as a young teacher, I found myself fascinated with the for-

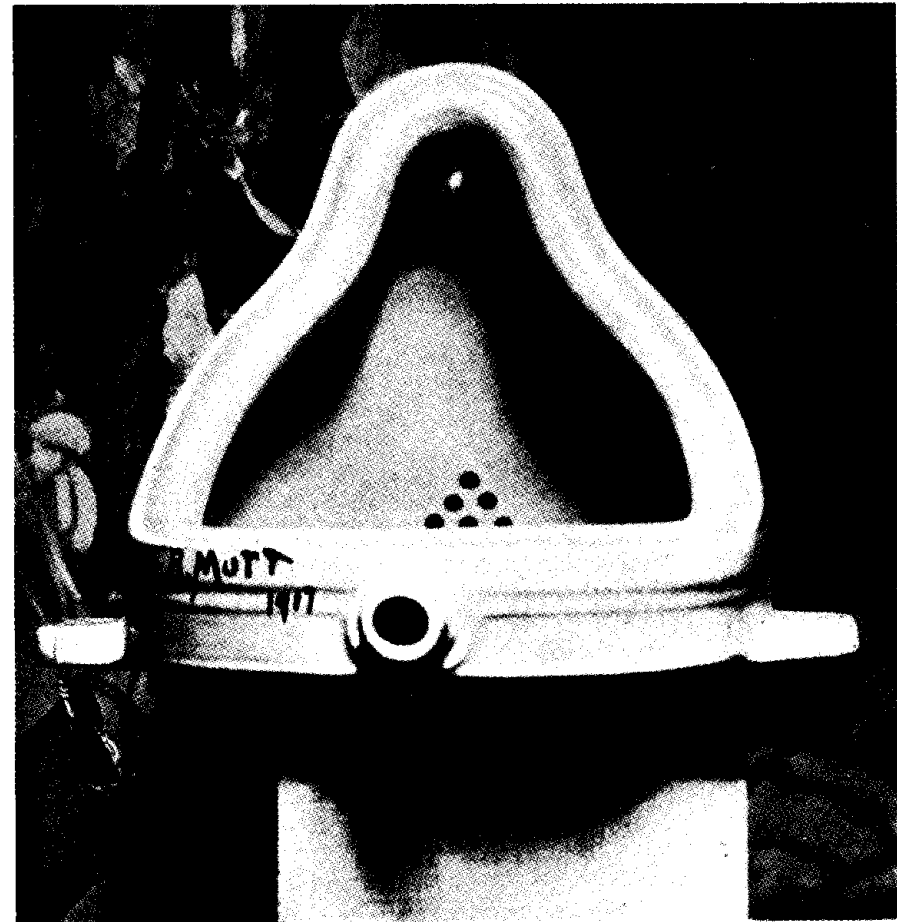


Fig. 1 *Fountain*, 1917, photograph by Alfred Stieglitz, copy negative from *The Blind Man*, no. 2, May 1917. Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Archives.

mal properties of *Fountain* and convinced that Duchamp had achieved a fusion of visual and intellectual properties which made it a masterpiece in his *oeuvre*, rather than the amusing or offensive anti-art object it was often portrayed as at that time.³

Fountain entered the history of art in April 1917 on the occasion of the first exhibition of the American Society of Independent Artists. Conditions regarding the organization of that Society are germane to the story.⁴ To a considerable extent the Society was a direct descendant of such organizations as the Eight, the 1910 Independents Group and the Armory Show—all were formed to provide exhibitions of American art outside the structure of the National Academy of Design and the offerings of conventional art galleries. From the outset, however, the Society of Independent Artists was distin-

guished by a contingent of French artists and the intent to be an ongoing organization modeled after the French Société des Artistes Indépendants. Duchamp was chief among those French artists, but Francis Picabia, Albert Gleizes and Jean Crotti played lesser roles. They had all arrived in New York in 1915, each in his way a refugee from the devastating war in Europe, each discovering that New York was a stimulating city where he could work again.⁵

Duchamp and Picabia lost no time in enlivening the New York art scene—Picabia with his radically new mechanomorphic portraits and Duchamp with his even more unusual work on the *Large Glass* and readymade sculptures that inhabited his apartment but were also exhibited for the first time.⁶ Picabia, who had established a close friendship with Alfred Stieglitz and his associates during the Armory Show, gravitated toward that sphere of influence and participated actively in the Modern Gallery and the magazine *291*, activities supported by Stieglitz but directed by Marius de Zayas. Duchamp became more attached to Walter and Louise Arensberg, recent settlers in New York who made a lasting mark through their patronage of avant-garde literature, their stimulating late-night soirées, their outstanding collection of modern art, and their commitment to Duchamp.⁷ The attorney John Quinn helped Duchamp too, although he was more important for other artists and authors whose careers had been disrupted by the war.⁸ These collectors, patrons, galleries, and avant-garde magazines are an indication of the lively art scene in New York from 1914 to 1918, a stark contrast to Europe, where salons had been suspended, magazines disbanded, and many galleries closed. There was cause to think that while the Europeans were absorbed by the war, the time had come for America to assume leadership in art. Some modernists even hoped that the democratic traditions of America might make this nation more hospitable toward contemporary art.

Serious discussions were initiated in the fall of 1916, and the Society of Independent Artists was incorporated in December 1916.⁹ The proclaimed democratic spirit of the Society was reflected in the officers and directors. William Glackens, an original member of the Eight, was president, and three other directors were either members or associates of the Eight—George Bellows, Rockwell Kent and Maurice Prendergast. Only John Marin came from the circle around Alfred Stieglitz, but there were also three women (Katherine S. Dreier, Regina A. Farrelly, and Mary C. Rogers), Walter Pach, who bridged several groups, and six men who frequented the Arensberg salon—Duchamp, Man Ray, John Covert, Joseph Stella, Morton S. Schamberg and Arensberg himself.¹⁰ The initial notice of the Society released in January 1917 underscored the

great need . . . for an exhibition, to be held a given period each year, where artists of all schools can exhibit together—certain that whatever they send will be hung . . . For the public, this exhibition will make it possible to form an idea of the state of contemporary art . . .

The program of the Society of Independent Artists, which is practically self-explanatory, has been taken over from the Société des Artistes Indépendants of Paris. The latter Society . . . has done more for the advance of French art than any other in-

stitution of its period. . . . The reason for this success is to be found in the principle adopted at its founding in 1884 and never changed: "No jury, no prizes."

There are no requirements for admission to the [American] Society save the acceptance of its principles and the payment of the initiation fee of one dollar and the annual dues of five dollars. All exhibitors are thus members and all have a vote for the directors and on the decisions made by the Society at its annual meetings. . . .¹¹

Encouraged by a surge in membership, the Society set an opening date for April 10, and committees were formed for such activities as publication, education, and installation. The educational aims of the exhibition were to be extended by public lectures and by a tearoom managed by Katherine S. Dreier with artists present to meet the public. Duchamp, who had become a major organizer for the Society, agreed to decorate the tearoom for Dreier, an artist and an activist in art and social issues, whom he had met at the Arensbergs'. He was also collaborating with his friends Henri Pierre Roché and Beatrice Wood to publish a magazine entitled *Blindman*, conceived as a forum for opinions and commentary on the Independents' exhibition.¹²

Arensberg served as managing director for the exhibition, and his apartment was the site of some important meetings.¹³ Duchamp was head of the hanging committee—a task for which he proposed a democratic solution of installation by alphabetical order rather than by groupings according to size, medium or style. Walter Pach, who sponsored Duchamp's coming to America, was treasurer, and Arensberg's cousin, John Covert, was secretary. In that capacity, Covert was responsible for instructions to the artists, which are helpful in reconstructing the sequence of events for *Fountain*. Works were to be received on April 3–5, and installation was scheduled for April 6–9. In order to be listed in the exhibition catalogue, a white card—properly filled in—had to be received by March 28, and the same deadline was set for photographs from any artist who wished to exercise his right to one illustration in the catalogue.¹⁴

The special opening was set for Monday evening, April 9, followed by the public opening on April 10. As those dates approached, the public was peppered with press releases stressing the democracy, the vast size, and the importance of the exhibition—2500 works stretching over almost two miles of panels.¹⁵ Although America's declaration of war on Germany usurped the headlines in early April, by all accounts the opening of the Independents' exhibition was a rousing success—save for one episode that generated a heated dispute among the directors and the resignation of Marcel Duchamp. In conflict with its stated principle of "no jury," the directors of the Independents rejected a sculpture, and, as reported in one press account,

Marcel Duchamp . . . the painter of "Nude Descending a Staircase" fame has declared his independence of the Independent Society of Artists, and there is dissension in the ranks of the organization that is holding at the Grand Central Palace the greatest exhibition of painting and sculpture in the history of the country.

It all grew out of the philosophy of J. C. Mutt, of Philadelphia, hitherto little known in artistic circles. When Mr. Mutt heard that payment of five dollars would permit him to send to the exhibition a work of art of any description or degree of excellence he might see fit he complied by shipping from the Quaker City a familiar article of

bathroom furniture manufactured by a well known firm of that town. By the same mail went a five dollar bill.

To-day Mr. Mutt has his exhibit and his \$5; Mr. Duchamp has a headache, and the Society of Independent Artists has the resignation of one of its directors and a bad disposition.

After a long battle that lasted up to the opening hour of the exhibition, Mr. Mutt's defenders were voted down by a small margin. "The Fountain," as his entry was known, will never become an attraction—or detraction—of the improvised galleries of the Grand Central Palace, even if Mr. Duchamp goes to the length of withdrawing his own entry, "Tulip Hysteria Co-ordinating," in retaliation. "The Fountain," said the majority, "may be a very useful object in its place, but its place is not an art exhibition, and it is, by no definition, a work of art."¹⁶

The brouhaha over *Fountain* continued to spread for several weeks, and a few corrections and additions appeared in an account in Boston on April 25:

A Philadelphian, Richard Mutt, member of the society, and not related to our friend of the "Mutt and Jeff" cartoons, submitted a bathroom fixture as a "work of art." The official record of the episode of its removal says:

"Richard Mutt threatens to sue the directors because they removed the bathroom fixture, mounted on a pedestal, which he submitted as a 'work of art.' Some of the directors wanted it to remain, in view of the society's ruling of 'no jury' to decide on the merits of the 2500 paintings and sculptures submitted. Other directors maintained that it was indecent at a meeting and the majority voted it down. As a result of this Marcel Duchamp retired from the Board. Mr. Mutt now wants more than his dues returned. He wants damages."¹⁷

Despite the lively interest of the press, however, the public knew surprisingly little about *Fountain*. As revealed in these articles, Richard Mutt's true identity was unknown, and no one could have been aware that the sculpture was a urinal because it was not exhibited, did not figure in the catalogue, and was neither reproduced nor described other than by the general, innocuous term "bathroom fixture." *Fountain* was not reproduced until the second issue of *The Blind Man* in May 1917—one month after the conflict began—and it is not yet clear when it became more generally known that Duchamp himself was the artist. With so little available in the public record until publication of the all-important second issue of *The Blind Man*, the history of *Fountain* must be sought in contemporary letters and diaries and in subsequent recollections. Unfortunately, the files of the Society of Independent Artists are of no help. They contain no minutes of the relevant meetings, no formal statement regarding *Fountain* and no letters of resignation. All records except some heavy ledgers were apparently destroyed around 1930 by a fire in the studio of a member of the Independents, A. S. Baylinson.¹⁸

In a recollection shared with Arturo Schwarz almost fifty years later, Duchamp said the idea of *Fountain* arose in a conversation with Arensberg and Joseph Stella, and "they immediately went to buy the item."¹⁹ The object selected was a porcelain urinal, presumably manufactured by the J. L. Mott Iron Works. Duchamp stated many years later that the pseudonym "Mutt" came from the Mott Works but was modified because

Mott was too close so I altered it to Mutt, after the daily strip cartoon "Mutt and Jeff" which appeared at the time, and with which everyone was familiar. Thus, from the

start there was an interplay of Mutt: a fat little funny man, and Jeff: a tall thin man. . . . And I added Richard [French slang for money-bags]. That's not a bad name for a "pissoitière."

Get it? The opposite of poverty. But not even that much, just R. MUTT.²⁰

There seems to be no reason to question Duchamp's memory of this episode. "Mutt and Jeff" was a popular comic strip, and Mott was a major manufacturer of plumbing fixtures with a large showroom in New York that could have displayed urinals closely resembling *Fountain*—insofar as may be judged from roughly contemporary illustrated catalogues (Fig. 2).²¹

Again in conversation with Arturo Schwarz, Duchamp recalled that the urinal was selected shortly before the opening of the Independents—a claim that is supported by the fact that *Fountain* did not figure in the catalogue (it missed the March 28 publication deadline), and because no witness to date has recalled seeing it in Duchamp's apartment. It (or another urinal) was in Duchamp's studio at least briefly, however, because there exists a photograph with a urinal suspended from the ceiling along with the *Hat Rack* and *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (Fig. 3).²²

Fountain next appeared in the context of installing the Independents' exhibition, and for this stage in the history, Beatrice Wood's diary and memories are crucial. During the week prior to the opening of the Independents, Wood was constantly in Duchamp's company, working with him and Henri Pierre Roché on the magazine *Blindman* and helping Duchamp with the installation of the Independents, a labor that occupied most of April 6–8. Her laconic diary entries record those activities and the first known mention of Richard Mutt and his exhibit:

Friday [April 6]	Work at Independents. Lunch Marcel Duchamp at Pollys. Home.
Sat. [April 7]	Independent. Dine Roche at Chinese Restaurant. Discussion about "Richard Mutt's" exhibition. Read Roche my articles [for <i>Blindman</i>]. We work at Marcells.
Sun. [April 8]	All day at Independent. Lunch. Pach, Friedman, Duchamp, Arensberg . . .
Mon. [April 9]	Meet Roche at printers to see about Blind Man Magazine at 9—with him all day. Batik. Opening of exhibit. Later jolly crowd at Beaux Arts. ²³

Wood's later recollections provide a more vivid account of one of those days:

Two days before the Exhibition opened, there was a glistening white object in the storeroom getting readied to be put on the floor. I can remember Walter Arensberg and George Bellows standing in front of it, arguing. Bellows was facing Walter, his body on a menacing slant, his fists doubled, striking at the air in anger. Out of curiosity, I approached.

"We cannot exhibit it," Bellows said hotly, taking out a handkerchief and wiping his forehead.

"We cannot refuse it, the entrance fee has been paid," gently answered Walter.

"It is indecent!" roared Bellows.

"That depends upon the point of view," added Walter, suppressing a grin.

"Someone must have sent it as a joke. It is signed R. Mutt; sounds fishy to me,"

grumbled Bellows with disgust. Walter approached the object in question and touched its glossy surface. Then with the dignity of a don addressing men at Harvard, he expounded: "A lovely form has been revealed, freed from its functional purpose, therefore a man clearly has made an aesthetic contribution."

The entry they were discussing was perched high on a wooden pedestal: a beautiful, white enamel oval form gleaming triumphantly on a black stand.

It was a man's urinal, turned on its back.

Bellows stepped away, then returned in rage as if he were going to pull it down. "We can't show it, that is all there is to it."

Walter lightly touched his arm, "This is what the whole exhibit is about; an opportunity to allow an artist to send in anything he chooses, for *the artist* to decide what is art, not someone else."

Bellows shook his arm away, protesting. "You mean to say, if a man sent in horse manure glued to a canvas that we would have to accept it!"

"I'm afraid we would," said Walter, with a touch of undertaker's sadness. "If this is an artist's expression of beauty, we can do nothing but accept his choice." With diplomatic effort he pointed out, "If you can look at this entry objectively, you will see that it has striking, sweeping lines. This Mr. Mutt has taken an ordinary object, placed it so that its useful significance disappears, and thus has created a new approach to the subject."

"It is gross, offensive! There is such a thing as decency."

"Only in the eye of the beholder, you forget our bylaws."²⁴

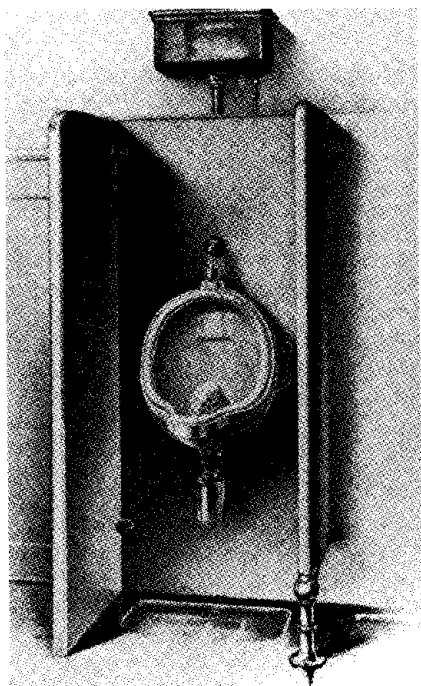


Plate 5385-A

Fig. 2 Porcelain lipped urinal, Panama model, from the J. L. Mott Iron Works, *Mott's Plumbing Fixtures Catalogue "A,"* New York, 1908. Courtesy, Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum Library: Collection of Printed Books.

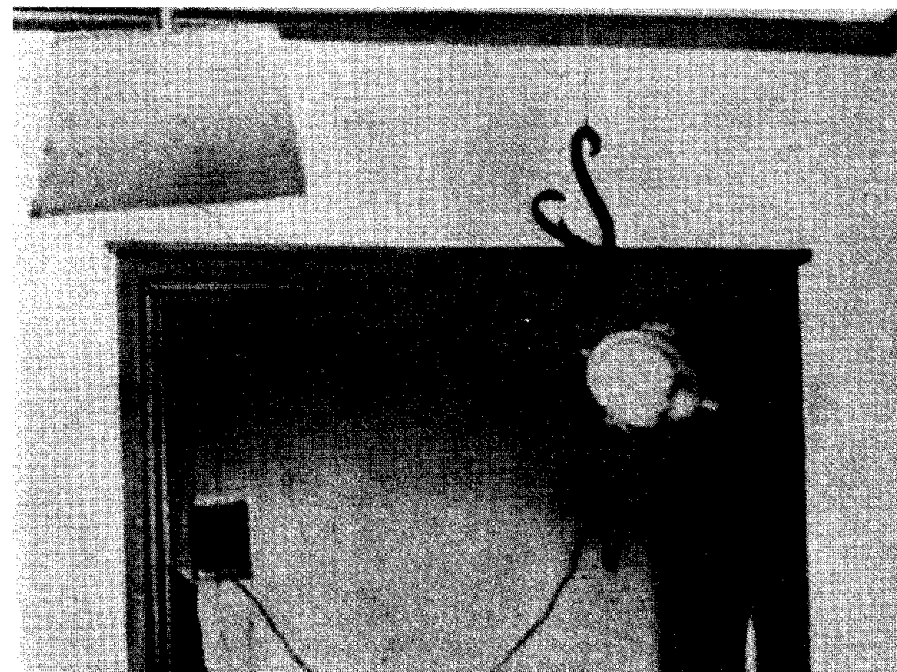


Fig. 3 Duchamp's studio at 33 West 67th Street, New York, 1917.

There was not time enough to assemble the entire board of directors, but a group of about ten was gathered to decide the issue and, according to a *New York Herald* reporter, a battle raged up to the opening hour of the exhibition on April 9, at which time "Mr. Mutt's defenders were voted down by a small margin."²⁵ On the face of it, that decision denied both the principle of "no jury" and the specific rules for exhibition mailed to all members, but there were grounds for suspending all of that in the view of the majority of the directors assembled. Statements quoted in the press and Beatrice Wood's memory coincide on this point: *Fountain* was not art and it was indecent. Unuttered but surely present in the decision was a concern for the reputation of the Independents in its debut before the American public.

Hostilities may have been suspended for what Beatrice Wood recorded as a spectacular opening and a "jolly crowd" later that night at the Beaux-Arts, but there should be no mistaking Duchamp's contempt for the action of the Society's directors. He resigned immediately and quietly took other actions that produced some of the few documents we possess. Those actions included initiation of the all-important second number of *The Blind Man* (May 1917) and two letters—one to his sister Suzanne in Paris and the other to Katherine S. Dreier.

Duchamp's letter to his sister on April 11 is most puzzling:

Raconte ce détail à la famille: Les Indépendants sont ouverts ici avec gros succès. Une de mes amies sous un pseudonyme masculin, Richard Mutt, avait envoyé une

pissotière en porcelaine comme sculpture; ce n'était pas du tout indécent aucune raison pour la refuser. Le comité a décidé de refuser d'exposer cette chose. J'ai donné ma démission et c'est un potin qui aura sa valeur dans New York.²⁶

I see no reason to doubt the sincerity of Duchamp's earliest known statement on *Fountain*, which he described simply as "a sculpture" that "was not at all indecent." But what is not yet clear is why he claimed that the urinal had been submitted by one of his "female friends under a masculine pseudonym, Richard Mutt." Beatrice Wood—who should know—has always insisted that Duchamp was the artist. How then should we take this statement? As others have observed, it is likely that Duchamp concealed his identity in order to pose a test for the Independents that would not be compromised by knowledge that *Fountain* had been submitted by a director of the organization. But why did he mislead his sister in Paris? Was the account given to Suzanne merely a "white lie" to conceal his authorship, or might we have here an early appearance of Duchamp's female alter ego, Rose Sélavy, or might he have been telling the truth?²⁷ Was *Fountain* actually submitted by a female friend? And if, indeed, a female friend sent *Fountain* to the Independents, must that mean that she and not Duchamp was the artist who conceived, selected and altered the urinal—or might she have acted merely as the shipping agent whose participation kept Duchamp out of sight? The last possibility seems most plausible, but this point remains a mystery. Even if Duchamp simply had a female "shipping agent," who was she? Did she live in Philadelphia, since newspaper reports consistently identified Mutt as a Philadelphian? To date, no Philadelphia contact has been identified, but a New York friend was implicated in a letter from Charles Demuth to Henry McBride, the art critic of *The Sun*, during the first week after the opening of the Independents:

A piece of scultor [sic], called: "a Fountain," was entered by one of our friends for the Independent Exhibition now open at the Grand Central Palace.

It was not exhibited. "The Independents," we are now told have a committee, —or jury, who can decide, "for the good of the exhibition. . . ."

If you think you could do anything with this material for your Sunday article we would appreciate it very much. . . .

P.S. If you wish any more information please phone, Marcel Duchamp, 4225 Columbus, or, Richard Mutte [sic], 9255 Schuyler.²⁸

The telephone number given for "Richard Mutte" was the number for Duchamp's friend Louise Norton, the estranged wife of Allen Norton, the publisher of *Rogue*. Unfortunately, Louise Norton has not provided additional information about her role in the Richard Mutt affair, but Demuth's letter indicates that she was in the innermost circle and possessed special information which she probably used in her crucial article, "Buddha of the Bathroom," for *The Blind Man*, no. 2.²⁹

Duchamp's other letter on April 11 was a simple statement of regret to Katherine S. Dreier that he would not be able to fulfill his promise to help decorate her tearoom at the Independents because he had "resigned from the board of directors."³⁰ This letter, however, provoked a reply on April 13, which contributes much to our knowledge of the events:

Rumors of your resignation had reached me prior to your letter of April eleventh. As a director of the Society of Independent Artists, I must use my influence to see whether you cannot reconsider your resignation. . . .

As I was saying to Arensberg, I felt it was of much more vital importance to have you connected with our Society than to have the piece of plumbing which was surreptitiously stolen, remain. When I voted "No," I voted on the question of originality—I did not see anything pertaining to originality in it; that does not mean that if my attention had been drawn to what was original by those who could see it, that I could not also have seen it. To me, no other question came up: it was simply a question of whether a person has a right to buy a readymade object and show it with their name attached at an exhibition? Arensberg tells me that that was in accord with you [sic] "Readymades," and I told him that was a new thought to me as the only "readymades" I saw were groups which were extremely original in their handling. I did not know that you had conceived of single objects.

I felt that it was most unfortunate that a meeting was not called and the matter discussed and passed upon by the Board of Directors; but I do feel that you have sufficient supporters with you to make it a very decided question whether it is right for you to withdraw. I hope, therefore, that you will seriously reconsider it, so that at our next directors' meeting I may have the right to bring forth the refusal of the acceptance of your resignation.³¹

Several points merit underscoring in this letter. First, Dreier claims that *Fountain* was "surreptitiously stolen." Second, she articulates what may be called the "plagiarism" or "originality" objection to *Fountain*, namely, that there is no "originality" to it, that a person has no right to exhibit a piece of plumbing that was merely bought as a readymade object and signed. The readymades in Duchamp's apartment had not distressed her this way. To the contrary she described them as "extremely original in their handling," but she saw those readymades as a group—a group which would have included the *Hat Rack* and snow shovel (*In Advance of the Broken Arm*) suspended from the ceiling, the coat rack (*Trébuchet*) nailed to the floor, and the *Bicycle Wheel*. In contrast to the grouping of those readymades in a private apartment, *Fountain* was a solitary item placed on a pedestal for the Independents. Finally she confirms that a vote on *Fountain* was taken among a group of the directors who, excepting perhaps only Arensberg and Duchamp himself, did not know the true identity of Mutt.

Duchamp, of course, was not persuaded to change his mind and the Richard Mutt affair was a tense topic at the next directors' meeting later in the month. To disarm the explosive situation, Glackens proposed a solution heartily embraced by Dreier as revealed in her letter to Glackens on April 26:

I want to express to you my profound admiration in the way you handled so important a matter as you did at the last meeting when it was at your suggestion that I made the motion, seconded by Mr. Covert, that we invite Marcel Duchamp to lecture one afternoon in our free lecture hall on his "Readymades" and have Richard Mutt bring the discarded object and explain the theory of art and why it had a legitimate place in an Art Exhibit. I was especially pleased because I said right along that I felt that if you had realized that the object was sent in good faith that the whole matter would have been handled differently. It is because of the confusion of ideas that the situation took on such an important aspect. I am very curious to see what the response will be, for with one stroke you cleared the atmosphere and will force Richard Mutt to show

