

H-France Review Vol. 19 (January 2019), No. 21

Robert Kilroy, *Marcel Duchamp's Fountain: One Hundred Years Later*. New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. xiii + 168 pp. Figures, notes, references, and index. €57.19 (hb). ISBN 978-3-319-69157-2; €44.02 (eb). ISBN 978-3-319-69158-9 (pdf, epub).

Review by Melissa Venator, Harvard Art Museums.

More than one hundred years have passed since Marcel Duchamp submitted his sculpture *Fountain*, an ordinary men's urinal, under the pseudonym R. Mutt to a 1917 exhibition organized by the Society of Independent Artists. He wanted to provoke his fellow members of the hanging committee by testing their pledge to exhibit any artwork entered by a fee-paying artist. The majority voted to reject the urinal, and Duchamp resigned in protest. The controversy might have gone unnoticed except for an issue of the journal *The Blind Man* published the following month, which ran an anonymous text criticizing the committee's rejection and a photograph of *Fountain* taken by Alfred Stieglitz in his studio.

Since its controversial birth in 1917, *Fountain* has been the subject of numerous interpretations. Yet, as Robert Kilroy notes in his new book *Marcel Duchamp's Fountain: One Hundred Years Later*, the sculpture's 2017 centennial passed with little fanfare, a silence he attributes to an impasse in *Fountain* scholarship. Despite one hundred years of debate, authors have stuck to the question of *Fountain's* status as art. William Camfield sums up the situation best: "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." [1]

As Kilroy observes, we continue to ask the same questions about *Fountain* but are no closer to a solution. This critical impasse and the retrospective spirit of the centennial prompted Kilroy to return to *Fountain*. Informed by the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, he presents *Fountain's* contested status—its most productive and defining legacy—as evidence of Duchamp's larger project. By redefining *Fountain* to include its founding controversy, Duchamp's actions and statements, and the one hundred years of debate it sparked, Kilroy proposes a new reading; namely, that "Duchamp's intention with *Fountain* was to expose the mechanism at work in the reception of his oeuvre" (p. 5). He uses Duchamp's own words to show how he created the conditions that led to *Fountain's* indeterminacy and ensured its future posterity. Some readers may question Kilroy's focus on intention and his acceptance of Duchamp at face value, as in his claim that "*what he [Duchamp] says always explains what he is doing; what he does always*

demonstrates what he is saying” (p. 6, emphasis original). But the resulting focus on Duchamp’s statements, especially from the end of his life, adds a new perspective to *Fountain* scholarship.

After an introductory opening chapter, Kilroy lays the psychoanalytic foundations of his “radical art historical approach” (p. 5). He starts with Duchamp’s first viewing of Gustave Courbet’s painting *The Origin of the World* in 1958 at the home of Lacan to justify his and others’ Lacanian readings of Duchamp’s art, most notably by Rosalind Krauss in “Notes on the Index” (1986) and *The Optical Unconscious* (1994) and by Thierry de Duve in *Pictorial Nominalism* (1991) and *Kant After Duchamp* (1996). Kilroy argues that both authors’ use of Lacan’s concept of the double bind to explain *Fountain*’s indeterminate status only mires them further in the unanswerable question “Is it art?” Quoting statements by the artist and citing his final work *Étant donnés*, Kilroy argues against the accepted view of Duchamp as a conceptual artist *avant la lettre*. Duchamp’s resistance to the poles of art/non-art and retinal/conceptual art and Slavoj Žižek’s re-reading of Lacan in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (2008) lead Kilroy away from the Lacanian double bind to a third path.

He compares the persistence of *Fountain*’s indeterminate status to a psychic rupture, like the uncanny in Freudian dream analysis, in which a breakdown of meaning points toward the underlying trauma. Using Žižek’s metaphor of a detective looking for clues at the scene of a crime, Kilroy adopts this psychoanalytic approach as a new method for resolving *Fountain*’s indeterminacy, itself a kind of traumatic repetition in *Fountain* scholarship. Duchamp even seems to welcome Kilroy’s investigative approach, having given his anonymous defense of *Fountain* in *The Blind Man* the title “The Richard Mutt Case.” Duchamp’s role in the *Fountain* controversy, his later work as an art advisor, and his published statements and interviews document a pattern Kilroy describes as an “active retreat from and direct involvement in the art world” (p. 57). This pattern only seems contradictory if the reader assumes that logical consistency is the goal. In fact, Duchamp’s paradoxical behaviors created the perfect conditions for *Fountain*’s indeterminacy and, in doing so, exposed the mechanism of artistic reception.

Kilroy’s close reading of Duchamp’s 1957 lecture “The Creative Act” summarizes the artist’s understanding of artistic creation and reception. In his lecture, Duchamp coins the phrase “art coefficient” to describe the gap between the artist’s intention and its expression in the finished artwork. This process of artistic creation operates independently of the artwork’s reception, in which, Duchamp argues, the viewer bestows a special significance on the everyday object and transforms it into an artwork. For Kilroy, *Fountain*’s equivocal status as urinal/sculpture plays out the magic of this transformation. Reception leads to an act of judgment and the possibility of professional success, an outcome that is more likely if the artist panders to taste—what Duchamp called “tasty affairs.”[2] His own non-conformity led to a series of high-profile rejections and controversies that shaped Duchamp’s career: by the Salon des Indépendents in 1912; by the Armory Show in 1913; by the Society of Independent Artists in 1917; and ending with his own rejection of art in the early 1920s. But this pattern of rejection and non-conformity also formed the basis of Duchamp’s posthumous reputation as a visionary artist.

Kilroy then turns to the question of *Fountain*’s long reception and Duchamp’s efforts to ensure its future posterity. In “The Creative Act,” Duchamp differentiates between the “tasty affairs” of the present and the lasting judgment of future generations. By conforming to “tasty affairs,” the artist risks missing out on lasting fame. Kilroy sees Duchamp acting on his belief by carefully cultivating and manipulating critics, collectors, gallerists, and biographers. With each, Duchamp

controlled the interpretation and representation of his art, going so far as to withhold support when his involvement was rebuffed. At the end of his life, in the late 1950s until his death in 1968, Duchamp created his self-image as a leading avant-garde artist of the interwar years through, in part, the *Fountain* controversy. For Kilroy, the replicas of *Fountain* Duchamp authorized in 1957 and the account of “The Richard Mutt Case” recorded in Robert Lebel’s monograph of the same year show the artist’s work to enshrine *Fountain* and his practice at large according to the process of reception outlined in “The Creative Act.”

For Duchamp scholars, much of the historical evidence and interpretations Kilroy presents will be familiar. As Kilroy admits, *Fountain* is a discourse in search of an object: the original urinal disappeared in 1917, and the only surviving primary documents are the articles and photograph published in *The Blind Man*. Kilroy revisits the same scraps of evidence as his forerunners and, like many of them, builds his interpretation on Lacanian psychoanalysis. Where he shines is in his close readings of Duchamp’s late statements. He avoids long theoretical monologues in favor of dilated explorations of a handful of texts, like his reading of “The Creative Act,” a 26-page lecture that occupies the second half of the book. Although Kilroy isn’t the first scholar to describe Duchamp’s self-promotional turn, his account is the most complete to date and the best effort to connect it to the canonical works of the 1910s, like *Fountain*.

From the book’s title, its publication at *Fountain*’s centennial, and its short length, the reader might assume this is a generalist overview. Although Kilroy includes a thorough object history, his ambition to propose a new critical account of Duchamp’s practice results in a specialist text. Readers without a basic understanding of Lacan or Duchamp may get lost in parts of Kilroy’s argument. This is due, in part, to the short length of the book. At only 168 pages, the text compresses complex arguments into thirteen short chapters at the expense of background that might have been useful; however, it also makes for a quick and satisfying read. Art historians will note the lack of images—the book’s only illustrations are of *The Blind Man* and pages from “The Creative Act”—but Kilroy’s text-based analysis does not suffer from their absence.

Ultimately, Kilroy makes a strong case that “Duchamp’s intention with *Fountain* was to expose the mechanism at work in the reception of his oeuvre” (p. 5), at least as measured by the artist’s statements. He offers a timely interpretation of Duchamp, who emerges from Kilroy’s analysis as an artist single-mindedly focused on the creation and reception of his own self-image. Duchamp’s machinations shaped how tastemakers understood his art during his lifetime and continue to influence scholarship today.

NOTES

[1] William A. Camfield, “Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*: Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917,” in Rudolf E. Kuenzli and Francis M. Naumann eds., *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), p. 64.

[2] Marcel Duchamp in Calvin Tomkins, *Marcel Duchamp: The Afternoon Interviews* (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2013), p. 55.

Melissa Venator
Harvard Art Museums
amy_venator@harvard.edu

Copyright © 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172