

REINVENTING THE WHEEL: THE READYMADE CENTURY



Publication sponsor



Andrew Liversidge's
project was supported
by the Bank of
Melbourne

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This education resource has been developed to support the thematic exhibition *Reinventing the Wheel: The Readymade Century* presented at the Monash University Museum of Art between 3 October and 14 December 2014. It includes learning activities that can be adapted to suit Visual Arts students at various levels. Starting points for discussion and selected artworks highlight some of the key ideas presented within the exhibition.

In addition to the learning activities the resource includes:

- An introduction to the exhibition
- A list of exhibiting artists
- A glossary of key terms

The resource is designed to be used in conjunction with the exhibition catalogue.

EXHIBITION INTRODUCTION

Arguably the most influential artistic development of the twentieth century, the 'readymade' was set in motion in 1913 when French artist Marcel Duchamp mounted an upturned bicycle on a stool. Duchamp's conversion of unadorned, everyday objects into fine art completely changed how artistic practice was considered. It was a revolutionary moment in modern art and the ripples from this epochal shift still resonate today.

Reinventing the Wheel: The Readymade Century pays tribute to Duchamp's innovation, including two key examples of his work: *Bicycle wheel* 1913 and *Bottle dryer* 1914. Other important historical works that MUMA has borrowed for the exhibition reveal the readymade's continuing presence in Minimalism and Conceptual art as well as its echoes in Pop art. The exhibition traces some of the ways the readymade has been reinterpreted by subsequent artists in acts of homage to Duchamp, or by further expanding the possibilities the readymade has unfurled.

Curated by Max Delany (former MUMA Director), Charlotte Day (Director), Francis E. Parker and Patrice Sharkey at Monash University Museum of Art.

LIST OF EXHIBITING ARTISTS

Carl Andre, Hany Armanious, Nairy Baghramian, Ian Burn, John Cage, Christo & Jeanne-Claude, Tony Cragg, Michael Craig-Martin, Martin Creed, Aleks Danko, Julian Dashper, Simon Denny, Marcel Duchamp, Sylvie Fleury, Ceal Floyer, Claire Fontaine, Gilbert & George, Félix González-Torres, Agatha Gothe-Snape, Greatest Hits, Matthew Griffin, Richard Hamilton, David Hammons, Matt Hinkley & Joshua Petherick, Lou Hubbard, Barry Humphries, Jeff Koons, Joseph Kosuth, Louise Lawler, Klara Lidén, Andrew Liversidge, James Lynch, Robert MacPherson, Callum Morton, John Nixon, Meret Oppenheim, Kain Picken & Rob McKenzie, Rosslynd Piggott, Man Ray, Scott Redford, Stuart Ringholt, Peter Saville, Charlie Sofo, Haim Steinbach, Ricky Swallow, Masato Takasaka, Peter Tyndall, Alex Vivian, Danh Vo, Andy Warhol and Heimo Zobernig.

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Conceptual art: art in which ideas take precedence over aesthetic and material concerns.

Readymade: everyday objects selected by the artist and designated as art.

Assemblage: a sculpture consisting of an arrangement of found objects and materials.

Collage: a composition made by juxtaposing visual elements selected from various images.

Dada: an international art movement beginning in 1916 in response to the horrors of WWI. Dada rejected reason and logic, and prized nonsense, irrationality and intuition.

Surrealism: a cultural movement that began in the early 1920s known for its artworks and writings exploring the relationship between dreams, the unconscious and reality.

Minimalism: a visual art movement beginning in the United States during the 1960s whereby artists sought to reveal the essence of a subject through eliminating all non-essential forms, features or concepts.

Pop art: an art movement that emerged in the 1950s in Britain and the United States. Pop art embraced the aesthetics of mass culture; advertising, comic books and everyday objects.

Avant-garde: innovative and experimental art practice at the vanguard of contemporary culture.



TRAJECTORIES OF THE READYMADE

RECONTEXTUALISING ORDINARY OBJECTS

Marcel Duchamp is a revolutionary figure in the art world of the 20th century and a trailblazer in broadening the scope of media available to the artist. He challenged audiences and institutions to reconsider the nature of art and provoked heated debates that continue to this day:

What is art?

What is art for?

What does it mean to be an artist?

Although Marcel Duchamp began his artistic career as a painter, he ceased painting in 1912 and by the following year was making sculptures that deliberately subverted traditional artistic conventions. The first readymade was created Duchamp found a bicycle wheel with forks attached, turned it upside down and attached it to a stool. *Bicycle Wheel* 1913 signifies a complete paradigm shift in artistic practice. Suddenly, art was capable of being everywhere and everything.

Art historians have suggested that the precursor to the readymade was Cubism. In the first decade of the 20th century artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque made collages that appropriated fragments from newspapers and other print media. Collage showed that a fragment made by another hand could be used within the composition of a new artwork. Duchamp took this concept to the extreme; a whole object could be taken out of the world and placed in the gallery as art.



LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

1. What makes a work of art a work of art? As a class, brainstorm and develop a set of criteria to define an artwork. Does *Bicycle Wheel* 1913 meet any of your criteria? Does it challenge your expectations of what a work of art can be? If so, in what ways?

2. *Bicycle wheel* 1913 was the first readymade. Art historians have suggested the wheel symbolically replaces a traditional statue while the stool is a parody of a museum pedestal. As a class reflect upon how the context where a work is viewed contributes to its meaning. Do you think this artwork would be viewed in the same way in the world outside the museum?

3. Duchamp refused to cater for the art market or meet the traditional expectations of audiences of the day. In readymade art, the 'hand of the artist' is virtually removed from the creative process. When Duchamp's readymades were first exhibited, critics thought they were immoral, vulgar and plagiaristic. Research and examine how ideas about authorship and the expectations of audiences have altered over the last 100 years.

4. Duchamp is renowned for attempting to break down the hierarchy of art and bring its masterpieces to the level of everyday objects. Examine Duchamp's body of work and explain how two specific artworks explore this idea.

5. MUMA's exhibition *Reinventing the Wheel: The Readymade Century* presents an 'assisted' readymade as well as a 'pure' readymade by Duchamp. Explain the distinction between these two types of readymade art. Why do you think Duchamp's *Bottle dryer* 1914 could be described as the most economical artistic gesture he would ever make?

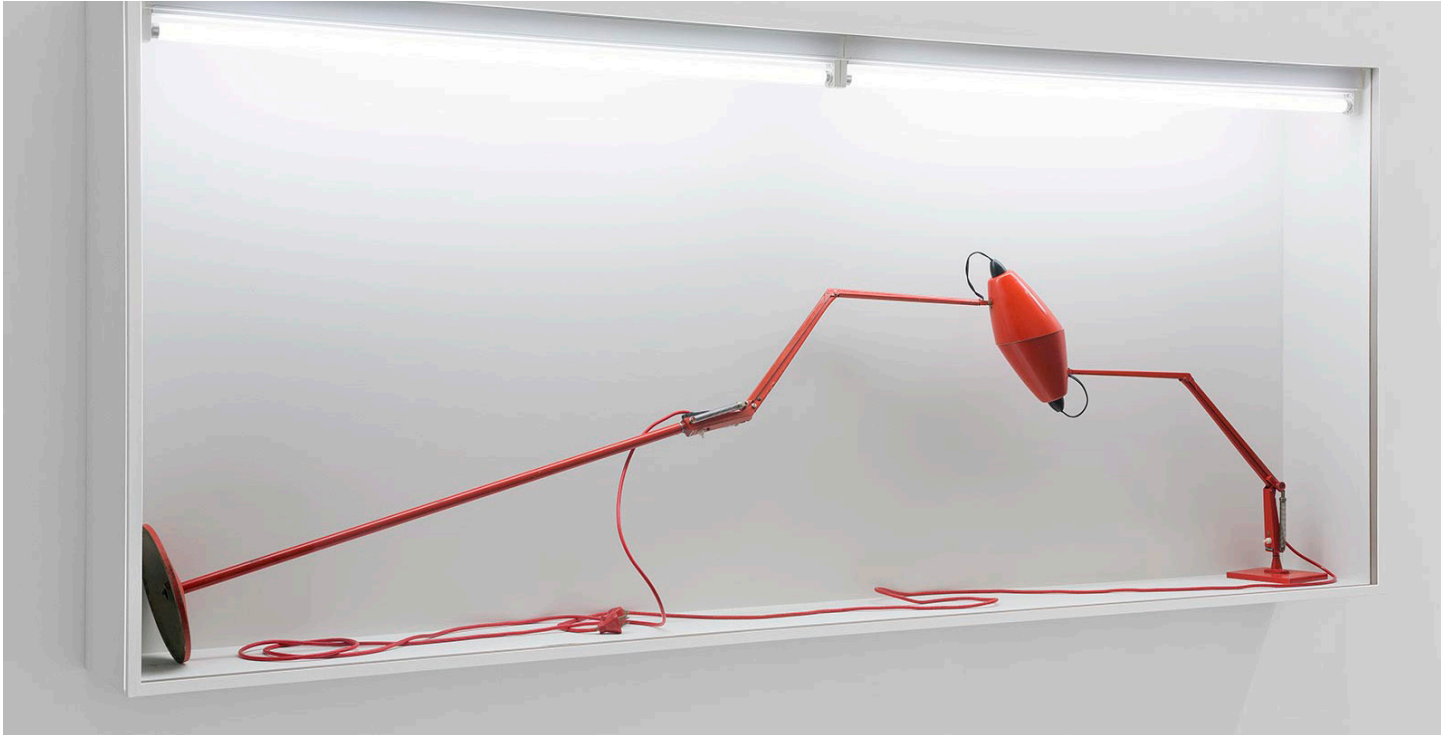
6. As well as being the first readymade, *Bicycle wheel* 1913 was also the first kinetic artwork ever created. What is kinetic art? Research and describe some examples of this kind of work.

7. Late in his life Duchamp reflected on the concept of the readymade: 'It's not the visual aspect of the Readymade that matters, it's simply the fact that it exists... Visuality is no longer a question: the Readymade is no longer visible, so to speak. It is completely grey matter. It is no longer retinal.'

a. Do you think readymade artworks communicate through the formal elements of art or defy traditional visual analysis? Discuss in relation to selected artworks from the exhibition.

b. Duchamp is recognised as the 'father' of Conceptual art and the innovation of the readymade shifted art from the eye to the brain. Research the evolution of Conceptual art during the 20th century. Besides Duchamp, which other artists are regarded as important players in this field of artistic practice?

8. During 2004 in a poll conducted by sponsors of Britain's Turner Prize, the majority of leading artists, dealers, critics and curators who were surveyed named Duchamp's readymade artwork *Fountain* 1917 as the most influential piece of modern art in existence. Research this artwork. Why do you think it is said to have had the greatest impact on art today?



DADA & SURREALISM

Duchamp exhibited with the Dadaists and Surrealists during the early decades of the 20th century. Both of these avant-garde movements were fascinated by strange juxtapositions of everyday objects and materials not traditionally used for making art, which, when combined, challenge ideas of reality in unexpected ways. Artists such as Man Ray and Meret Oppenheim selected, modified and combined everyday manufactured objects to render them unusable and transform them into art. In the work *Stretch* 2007, contemporary Melbourne-based artist Lou Hubbard plays with surrealist tendencies as she anthropomorphises two reading lamps by positioning them inside a vitrine as if locked in an embrace.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

1. What are the traditional uses for the objects Man Ray selected to make *Cadeau (Gift)* 1921? Do the original functions of these objects remain or are they denied? Discuss.
2. Compare the way that Man Ray and Oppenheim have transformed everyday materials in *Cadeau (Gift)* 1921 and *Squirrel* 1969. Interpret the symbolic meanings and messages implied by each artwork. Analyse how texture and form are used as formal elements in these artworks.
3. Using Lou Hubbard's *Stretch* 2007 as an example to discuss as a class, ask each student to contribute at least one word that comes to mind when they look at the artwork. Using a selection of these words, develop a concrete poem in response to the artwork.

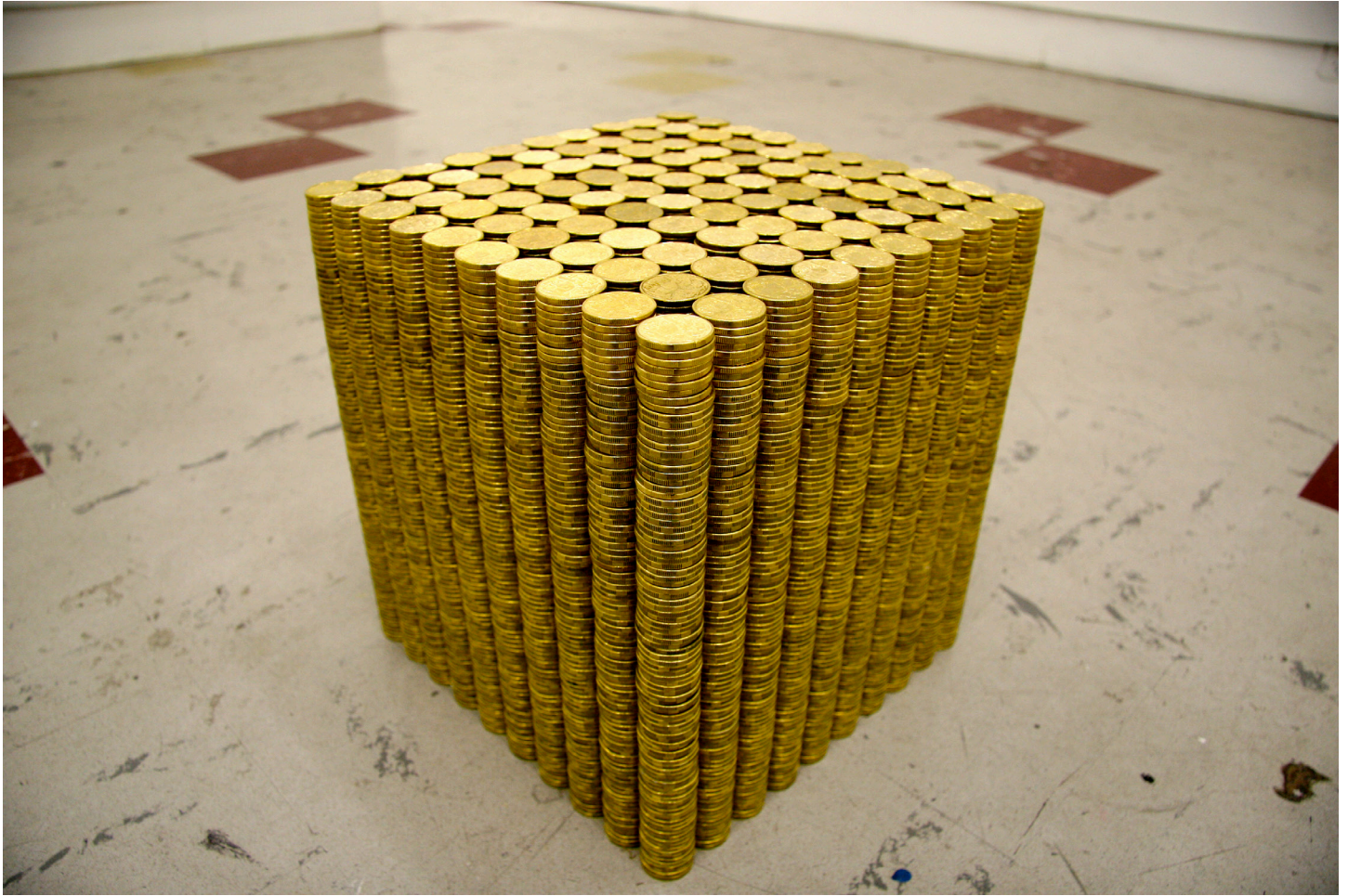
LANGUAGE, WORDPLAY AND HUMOUR

There are many instances of dry wit and irony in readymade art by Duchamp. In 1915 Duchamp titled an unmodified snow shovel *In advance of a broken arm*. Playful and mischievous language is also seen in *L.H.O.O.Q.* 1919. To make this artwork Duchamp drew a moustache on a postcard reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece *Mona Lisa* and altered the title to *L.H.O.O.Q.* This series of letters when pronounced in French can be roughly translated as 'She has a beautiful bottom'.

Duchamp's inventiveness with language influenced conceptual artists from the 1960s onwards. In the exhibition this is evident in the work of Joseph Kosuth. In the Kosuth artwork *One and three tables* 1965 the artist creates a triptych by placing a real table in a gallery next to a photograph of the table and a dictionary definition of the word 'table'. The artwork exposes the limitations of language as the viewer compares levels of accuracy in communicating meaning through object, image and language.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

1. In what ways do you think the title of an artwork can affect the way it is perceived by the audience?
2. How important are the titles of the artworks in the exhibition *Reinventing the Wheel: The Readymade Century*?
3. Do any of the artworks in the exhibition make you laugh? Which works did your class find funny?
4. As a class create your own readymade exhibition. Select some objects from your home, school or local op-shop to assemble and/or designate as readymades. Develop a list of titles for your readymades. Display and photograph your readymades along with their titles.



ENGAGEMENT WITH MANUFACTURED OBJECTS: CONSUMERISM, CURRENCY AND DESIRE

By selecting prefabricated objects to make his readymades, Duchamp attempted to destroy the notion of the uniqueness of the art object. His idea of transforming the products of modern industrial life into a resource for making art was later taken up by Pop artist Andy Warhol in artworks like *Campbell's soup II – cheddar cheese* 1969. Through the commercial aesthetic of Pop art, the readymade can suggest how advertising manufactures desire. In the exhibition, artworks by Jeff Koons, Sylvie Fleury and Greatest Hits challenge the viewer to engage with the seductive yet ultimately vacuous concerns of consumer culture. Melbourne-based artist Andrew Liversidge transforms currency itself into a readymade. His artwork *IN MY MIND I KNOW WHAT I THINK BUT THAT'S ONLY BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE* 2009 is an installation of 10,000 one dollar coins on loan from the Bank of Melbourne and stacked in a cube.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

1. Andy Warhol's *Campbell's soup II – cheddar cheese* 1969 appropriates the graphic design of a tin of canned soup and repositions it as art. Research the history of Pop-art in America. Apart from the readymade, what else influenced the subject matter depicted by Pop artists? Select some packaging that is readily available at a local shop. In the classroom, create a Pop art style painting that appropriates and enlarges the original graphic design.

2. The object may exist in the world for years but it does not become art until the artist has selected and designated it as art. Consider this statement in relation to Andrew Liversidge's artwork *IN MY MIND I KNOW WHAT I THINK BUT THAT'S ONLY BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE* 2009. What will happen to the \$10,000 after the exhibition finishes and the coins return to the bank for circulation? Will the coins still be art?

3. In 2011 American artist Jeff Koons filed a copyright lawsuit against a San Francisco homewares boutique selling balloon-dog-shaped plastic book ends that resemble his sculpture *Balloon dog (Red)* 1995. Koons lost the case because no one owns the idea of making a balloon dog; it is part of the public domain. Research this art issue. What does the case teach us about controversy, copyright and contemporary art?

4. Melbourne-based art collective Greatest Hits commissioned scent maker Air Aroma to help create a fragrance that replicates the distinctive scent a consumer experiences when they first unwrap a newly purchased Apple MacBook Pro from its packaging. Do you think a scent can be art? Discuss. If you were going to turn a scent into an artwork, what scent would you choose?

5. If Andrew Liversidge's work was for sale, how much would it be worth?



SUBVERTING MODERNIST HEROICS: TRASH ART, WASTE AND SCAVENGING

In the early 20th century Duchamp's readymades simultaneously subverted and transcended the traditional value-judgements of the art world by elevating mundane objects to the status of art. More recent artists have taken this idea even further by transforming garbage into art. Artworks including Martin Creed's *Work no. 88 - A sheet of A4 paper crumpled into a ball* 1995, Ceal Floyer's *Garbage bag* 1996, Kiara Liden's *Untitled (Trashcan)* 2011 and James Lynch's *Real life is everywhere* 1998 all challenge the viewer with their modest, anti-monumental subject matter.

The readymade and the material nature of life today have opened up an almost overwhelming amount of options for contemporary artists, many of whom are grappling with a world oversaturated with new products and ethical concerns about what is left behind. Charlie Sofo's work *Chocks* 2013 presents a series of objects removed from behind the wheels of trailers in Brunswick. This act of scavenging is Sofo's way of 'coming to terms with the great trash pile of consumer society'.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

1. Do you think rubbish and rubbish bins are worthy subject matter for contemporary artists to explore through their practice? Discuss.
2. To create his simulated readymade *Real life is everywhere* 1998 Melbourne-based artist James Lynch meticulously recreated a selection of packaging that epitomises the refuse of consumer culture in the late 1990s. As a class, collaborate to create an updated version of this artwork. Select and bring a range of current packaging, tickets and everyday items to school. Each student can select one object to observe carefully and reproduce as accurately as possible using paper, cardboard and markers. Arrange your completed artworks in a class installation.
3. Melbourne-based artist Charlie Sofo is a keen observer of urban details in his local streets. Go for a walk in your local suburb and photograph a collection of similar objects. For example a group of letterboxes, garden pots, doorways or shop signage. Arrange and present these images in a series.

