

NFTs, or The Readymade Reversed

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When Marcel Duchamp invented the readymade in 1913–15, he demonstrated that a quantum of information—e.g., as a title, *In Advance of the Broken Arm*—could disorganize the objectivity of a snow shovel by transposing it as art. This definitional aporia un-formed the stuff that constituted the work (wood and galvanized iron) as it fell between two contradictory categories, ordinary household tool and work of art. This conceptual desublimation (which is the opposite of dematerialization, *pace* the historiography of Conceptual art) was succeeded by the literal loss or disappearance of many readymades (again, not through dematerialization but through *abandonment*). The most notorious among them, such as *Fountain* of 1917, persisted not as things but as profiles in information, discursive figures composed of text, photography, and “reenactments” or editions. With the readymade, Duchamp gave sculpture over to information on two registers: He desublimated matter by suspending it between two names, shovel and sculpture; and he abandoned objects for discourse. Desublimation and abandonment.

Just over one hundred years later, the NFT has arrived to reverse Duchamp’s gesture, or perhaps to complete the cycle of information’s commodification that is fundamental to late capitalism. Forget the hysteria about the market for NFTs, or that someone unknown to the mainstream art world (Mike Winkelmann, aka Beeple) nearly achieved the auction prices of Jeff Koons and David Hockney. And certainly, ignore the crocodile tears of collector Sylvain Levy, who disingenuously declared to the *New York Times*, “Art is no longer about a relationship with an object. It’s about making money. . . . I feel bad for art.”¹ After all, the market will do what the market will do. The thing to note is the meaning of NFT: *non-fungible token*. The fungibility of information—in this case a large digital file of thoroughly ordinary Internet memes titled *Everydays: The First 5,000 Days* (2021)—has been arrested in the form of an NFT as private property. Its value is structurally dependent upon the exclusive right to control its circulation. This is particularly perverse given that this “non-fungible” token is made from images Beeple *posted online* beginning in 2007, and so in theory could be harvested and collaged from countless iPhones around the world. Here, “art” has

1. Scott Reyburn, “JPG File Sells for \$69 Million, as ‘NFT Mania’ Gathers Pace,” *New York Times*, March 11, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/11/arts/design/nft-auction-christies-beeple.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

been deployed as the ideological mechanism by which the previously mobile production of Bepple is made into private property, susceptible to exuberant speculation. In other words, the category of art is equated with non-fungibility: It is the readymade reversed. In a particularly telling, if stunningly unimaginative, move, the buyer of Bepple's work plans to build a museum to house it. Twobadour Paanar, the steward of the NFT fund Metapurse, speaking on behalf of the buyer, known as Metakovan, told *The Art Newspaper*,

We hope to work with some of the best architects on the planet to design something truly worthy of this masterpiece. . . . Unlike the *Mona Lisa* that's in physical space, this is purely digital. So we intend to create a monument that this particular piece deserves, which can exist only in the metaverse.²

It bears repeating: Duchamp used the category of art to liberate materiality from commodifiable form; the NFT deploys the category of art to extract private property from freely available information.

Of course, the readymade came relatively early in Duchamp's career. His final work, *Étant donnés* (1946–66), modeled a wholly different articulation between spectatorship and materiality. Unlike the mediagenic readymades, *Étant donnés* resists reproduction absolutely. It is impossible to pretend to know it without seeing it in person in Philadelphia. And when one does, one must press one's face against a sweat-stained door and strain to see what's going on through nasty peepholes. To see this artwork, one must literally set one's body against it, making its materiality inescapable. There is consequently no fungibility here either, but rather than enabling financial speculation, this non-fungibility guarantees a face-to-face encounter with absolute singularity.

The relation between matter and property is political. Art can function as a technology of extraction, or it can, as Duchamp's work did, destabilize the moment of matter's becoming-property in ways that are historically specific and aesthetically engrossing. Such destabilization may address a variety of pressing questions including the legacy of slavery (the human becoming property), economic injustice (labor becoming property), and the persistence of colonial relations in the museum (race becoming property). But what are the aesthetics of such incomplete, or traumatic, or sensual, or enraged passages of matter into property and property into matter? Obviously, there can be no single answer to this question. I am convinced, however, that such an aesthetics must be founded on spectatorial generosity, in which one meets the gift of the artist's work with the gift of one's time. If our acts of looking refuse to be possessive—if they are aimed not at defining an object but rather at exploring it as a material territory of inexhaustible event—then appropriation will be impossible. After all, *Everydays* can only be considered non-fungible because enough people agreed that it is. On the contrary, in their previous life, all of this work's constituent images functioned online as a mode of communication. The NFT is a social contract that values property over material experience. That contract can be broken.

2. Helen Stoilas, "Virtual Museum to Be Built to House Bepple's Record-Breaking Digital Work," *The Art Newspaper*, March 13, 2021, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/virtual-museum-to-be-built-to-house-beeple-s-record-breaking-digital-work>.