

What follows is an epitome of a much longer and more expansive text, *Jemanden ein R Mutt's zeugnis ausstellen, Monsieur Goldfinch* (Wild Pansy Press, April, 2008, ISBN 978 1 900687 28 7.), which articulates a comprehensive account of the progress of a certain urinal, from its submission to an art exhibition, and its subsequent rejection, its re-contextualisation and re-appropriation, and ultimate annihilation, by a number of different agencies all pursuing their own personal agendas. These were Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven; Walter Conrad Arensberg; Pierre-Henri Roché, Beatrice Wood and Marcel Duchamp; Alfred Stieglitz and, again, W C Arensberg and M Duchamp.

The scope of this account is indicated by the fact that this text addresses merely the role of the first of the protagonists, cited above, in a series of events traditionally diverting the attention of Duchamp scholars.

Glyn Thompson. May 2012.

" Jemandem ein R Mutt's zeugnis ausstellen, Monsieur
Goldfinch",
a.k.a.
" The Baroness' barrenness."

“If not Marcel, “

On December 1, 2004, the online U.K. edition of the BBC News announced that 500 'art experts' had recently voted a "gentlemen's urinal" to be the most influential art-work of all time. Its author, one Marcel Duchamp we are told, had shocked the art establishment when he took a urinal, signed it (R Mutt) and put it on display - in 1917. For 'art expert' Simon Wilson, the urinal's election, whilst coming as "a bit of shock" [which is the last thing you'd expect of an avant-garde work of art, of course] nevertheless reflected " the dynamic nature of art today and the idea that the creative process is the most important thing - the work itself can be made of anything and can take any form."

Clearly, the reputation of the purest Dada iconoclast rests fairly and squarely on Mutt's legacy.

Setting aside for a moment the question of quite how a urinal which disappeared in 1918 could reflect the dynamic nature of art eighty-six years later, there are one or two little problems with the BBC's account.

Firstly, the "dynamic" art of 2004 included 16 urinals apparently by the hand of Marcel Duchamp, the first from 1950 and none from 1917. Walk into art museums in Paris, London, Stockholm, Ottawa, Kyoto, Tel Aviv, Rome, San Francisco, Philadelphia and even Bloomington, Indiana, and you can inspect some of them - but not the item in question.

Secondly, the great and the good of 2004 really should have known better because, as they had been in a position to know for 22 years, the "art establishment" of 1917, whatever that was, had not been shocked by Duchamp's signing of a urinal, or by his putting it on display in the place in which you found works of art, in an art gallery - because he hadn't; they should they have known better because Duchamp himself had made it quite clear in 1917 that he was not the author of such a gesture; not that they knew that until 1982.

It had been in just another of his matter-of-fact letters, written in French to his sister Suzanne in France, on 11 or 12 April, 1917, that Duchamp had said he was not the author of the urinal submitted to the New York Independents a few days before; rather, a female friend of his was. The letter opens with a discussion of a prospective exhibition of Suzanne's work before moving on to a snippet for the eyes of the family only. This is not remotely a public manifesto, just another letter from America. Duchamp tells his sister he had felt obliged to resign from the Independents committee since they had broken their rule by rejecting an item, a urinal submitted by a female friend of his under the pseudonym R Mutt; and by the way, it was not in any way indecent. No title, such as *Fountain*, is mentioned. He explains to Suzanne that what he is telling her is no more than a piece of gossip which makes sense only in New York. There is nothing in what he says, beyond that fact that the urinal was rejected, about challenging the concept enshrined in the Independents' rules as to who decides what is a work of art. Describing it as a porcelain urinal submitted by his female friend as a sculpture, Duchamp confirmed that the Independents had spoken; that it was not he who had submitted a urinal as a sculpture: nor had he judged it as such, or not.

(Not that he cared, as will become clear.)

Next Duchamp speculates idly on the idea of a *Salon des Refusées*, which he quickly rejects, for to put Mr Mutt's urinal on show would be "pleonastic", implying that a *Salon des Refusées* would not overturn the Independents' judgement that, self-evidently, a urinal could

énot be considered to be a work of art; (any mutt could see that.) It is important to note that Duchamp is saying here that there would be no point in exhibiting Mr Mutt's urinal in order to demonstrate that it is a work of art, because the Independent's had decided it wasn't. and which a Salon des Refusées would do nothing but confirm.

This would appear to indicate not only that Duchamp clearly perceived a limited shelf life to an already exhausted gesture, (since the urinal had failed to make the point that a utilitarian object could be a work of art – if indeed that was the point of his female friend's gesture,) but also that the question for him was irrelevant anyway, as Suzanne well knew. This is because the previous year Duchamp, with his sister acting as proxy, had already leapfrogged this question into an anaesthetic realm which his own productions would never subsequently vacate. What Suzanne was already in a position to know was that in describing the urinal submitted by her brother's friend as a sculpture disqualified it, for him, from being a readymade, since only he – Duchamp - differentiated utilitarian objects from art objects by designating the former as 'readymades', and therefore not art. A committee member himself, Duchamp had not rejected the offending item. He hadn't been required to, for when it had arrived he was elsewhere, busy hanging the 2500 entries to the exhibition in alphabetical order of the artists' names, beginning with the letter R, for 'art', no doubt. Since the entry deadline had passed, on march 28, he was not necessarily expecting the arrival, acceptance or rejection of a urinal which wasn't - 'art', that is; and thus he was in no position to do any more than report to his sister what he had learned of the affair second or third hand, after the event. She would be interested because of what she had done for him in 1916, as his letter of 15 January of that year elucidates.

What the above tells us is that Duchamp was already toying with the idea that he could appropriate this urinal for his own purposes, which itself implies that he knew more than just the identity of his female friend, or the true purpose of her gesture, and how she might react. That is, he knew just how far he could go, and where.

By the time of his death, Duchamp's authorship of a urinal of significance was securely embedded in the master narrative of post-war modernist art, since from the 1950s increasingly frequent exhibitions of authenticated full-size replicas of utilitarian urinals, all titled *Fountain* and attributed to Duchamp, had consolidated an identity, as the newly disinterred ancestor of a new kind of modernism, seemingly so secure as to render its own authenticity beyond dispute. The prime mover of this attribution was Andre Breton's *Phare de la Marieé* text published first, in French, in *Minotaure* in 1935, and ten years later, in English, in the March, 1945 edition *View Magazine*, in New York; here the word urinal is mistranslated as 'latrine'.

However, in 1982 Francis Naumann published *Ten Letters from Marcel Duchamp to Suzanne Duchamp and John Crotti*, which were reprinted in *Affectueusement Marcel; The Selected Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp*. (edited by Naumann and Hector Obalk. 2000,) of which items 11 and 15 are of particular interest. The contents of these two private letters, Duchamp's own words written in his own hand, sent by him from New York to his sister Suzanne in Paris in January 1916 and April 1917, make it crystal clear that as far as he was concerned he was not the author of a urinal, which could not by his own definition be a 'readymade'. These letters entered the public domain through the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institute, in the following manner. On Suzanne Duchamp-Crotti's death her estate was settled by her brother Marcel, who retained her archive, and some paintings; about 20 more were given to the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris. (Duchamp's own widow retained this material on his death.) But Crotti's archives, containing hitherto unpublished material, including these letters, plus the bulk of his paintings, passed to his great nephew and niece, Andre Buckles and Alice Buckles Brown. The Buckles family eventually gave the Crotti

archive, containing the two letters, to the Smithsonian. One might reasonably assume from this that a knowing Duchamp was happy for the letters to eventually find their way into the public domain, but only after his death.

So, hidden away, unsuspected, in a private archive during the period when his identity was being carefully constructed, particularly, but not exclusively, after 1945, the information the letters contained never informed any public debate over Duchamp's authorship of the urinal. One might reasonably suppose that had this information entered the public domain in April 1917 then the history of avant-garde art, art history and art criticism might have been significantly different. But it was not until 65 years after the event, in 1982, and 14 years after Duchamp himself had died, that the 'art world' possessed this unique piece of forensically admissible evidence which challenged fundamentally an established default position whose authority had become so deeply embedded as to have been, up to that point, and pretty much ever since, beyond question. The problem was, this evidence contradicted a narrative constructed in total ignorance of its existence. The blindingly obvious problem which this material presented to the history of modernism was raised by William Camfield in his Nova Scotia conference paper entitled *Marcel Duchamp's Fountain: Aesthetic Object, Icon or Anti-Art?* Fellow delegates at the conference displayed no interest whatsoever in Camfield's announcement that Duchamp had told his sister two days after Mr Mutt's urinal had been rejected by the Independents that he was not responsible for it. The best explanation Camfield could offer to this conundrum was that Duchamp must, for some inexplicable reason, have been lying to his sister. However, set against the style and content of every other letter of Duchamp's which has been preserved there are no grounds whatsoever for doubting that he was telling his sister the truth, especially given the trivial nature of an event which would, in his opinion, make no sense to anyone outside the hot-house of the New York avant-garde. And as we shall see, the facts of the matter, which make it clear that Mr Mutt's gesture caused barely a ripple, via a low-circulation ephemeral avant-garde 'rag' that ran to two issues only, confirm the veracity of Duchamp's statements to his sister.

The raw nerve which Camfield's announcement touched is the requirement to discard from modernist art history one of its essential planks, Duchamp's authorship, and his alone, of a single gesture upon which a great deal depends, a great deal of avant-garde art practice since the 1960s, for example, not to mention the validity of the judgement of his urinal as the most influential art work of all time, since one might surmise that this accolade goes to Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling. Grounded in the validity of the gesture of challenging the Independents to exhibit a ready-made object as a work of art which the submission of Mr Mutt's urinal has come to represent, so the myth runs, in 1917 this gesture challenged the assumption as to what may or may not be considered to be a work of art, and who says so. But remove the foundation of Duchamp's authority for Mr Mutt's gesture and "the idea that the creative process is the most important thing - the work itself can be made of anything and can take any form" evaporates from Duchamp's impeccable modernist c.v., only to condense in someone Else's.

That Richard Mutt's urinal enjoys unrivalled ancestral pre-eminence in the history of contemporary, conceptual art is reconfirmed in Brian Dillon's essay in the Tate Hirst retrospective catalogue, pages 25 and 26, where we find the Tate's own 'replica' urinal, of 1917/1964, illustrated. Proposing that "it is still rare for an artist to explore the nature of our cultural and psychological disgust reaction to the degree that Hirst has over the past 20 years or more", Dillon notes that disgust, amongst the most ambiguous of the emotional and psychological responses that Hirst's medically oriented works invoke and risk, has had a vexed history, in that it is not clear that it is a licit response to a work of art because disgust is one of the reactions that seems to disqualify the object of image from being a work of art at all. Citing Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790) Dillon proposes that for Kant, beauty and

repulsion cannot coincide, beauty being essential to the definition of art. But a substantial exception to the requirement is the phenomenon of the sublime, and disgust, Dillon might say, is a particularly violent instance of the sublime. Evoking Richard Mutt's gesture, Dillon notes that from Marcel Duchamp onwards (and not, presumably, before) art subsumed all manner of revolting things and ideas into itself; that we might recall, for example, that the critical objection to Duchamp's *Fountain* in 1917 had as much to do with the obscenity of exhibiting a urinal in an art gallery as with the object's simple incongruity amongst paintings and sculptures.

Clearly, for the orthodox view embedded in the master narrative which Dillon subscribes to, it all starts with Duchamp, that 'Duchamp's' urinal validates Hirst's practice, and that the identity of the 'ready-made', to which status Richard Mutt's *Fountain* allegedly subscribes, is central to the argument.

But we should bear in mind the following.

That Richard Mutt's urinal was not entitled '*Fountain*' when it was submitted to the Independents; that Marcel Duchamp was not its author: that Duchamp's understanding of Richard Mutt's urinal was that it was not a readymade, but a sculpture: that the post-Mutt urinal appearing in Roché's post-May 1917 photograph's of the 33 West 67th Street studio was, between April 1917 and 1918, when it disappeared. never exhibited, either with other works of art, or in an art gallery, as work of art or anything else: that this urinal could only be encountered, after May 1917, in the 33 West 67th Street studio, accompanied by other readymades: that Arensberg defended the urinal on the basis of its formal beauty and that Duchamp recommended Mutt's sculpture to his sister as perfectly inoffensive. (For the scenario underpinning this summary, see my *Jemandem ein R Mutt's zeugnis ausstellen, Monsieur Goldfinch.*)

But given the tenacity of the master narrative in the history of modern art, it is hardly surprising that Camfield's announcement was unceremoniously shown the door in 1987, but this evidence, at the point at which it entered the public domain, carried with it a forensic obligation that at least Camfield, to his eternal credit, recognised deserved to be taken seriously. Thus the plain and simple fact is that, according to Duchamp's own, unique, contemporary, forensically admissible testimony, he was not responsible for Mr Mutt's urinal, which was not a 'readymade'. Given the universal acceptance of the reliability of his correspondence as a whole, there is no *prima facie* case for doubting his word. And the fact remains that, out of all the many statements Duchamp made in letters, from any period, it is the sincerity of his 1917 disclaimer, and this alone, which has been retrospectively called into question - for the sole reason that it contradicts the assumptions of a deeply entrenched critical tradition which, developing in wilful ignorance of it, was damned if it was going to let any pesky little facts get in the way of a good story.

Duchamp's inarguable first direct contact with the urinal, which did not include the events of 9 April, 1917, in which he played no part, is confirmed by *The Blind Man no. 2*, in which articles and poems on pages 4, 5 + 6 address The Richard Mutt Affair, focussing on Arensberg's defence of the item apropos the Independents' apparent deferral of the judgement of the condition of art to the submitting artist. Duchamp's later recollections of those events do not square either with what we know from *The Blind Man no. 2*, what we have learnt since or with simple logic. As *The Blind Man no. 1* had been published to coincide with the opening of the exhibition so *The Blind Man no. 2* was published to coincide with its end, hopefully initiating a discourse surrounding The Richard Mutt case whose flames the press had signally failed to fan; the last news article, still citing this Philadelphian as the author, apparently appeared in Boston on April 25. The affair was over after barely two weeks,

confirming Duchamp's admission to his sister of its essentially ephemeral nature and limited interest.

An example of Duchamp's selective memory, in this case apropos the urinal's disappearance after its rejection, is recorded by Cabanne in 1967, in which his interviewee says that " After the exhibition, we found the *Fountain*, behind a partition, and I retrieved it."

The problem with this statement is that the exhibition ended on May 6th, but Stieglitz' photograph of the urinal was published in *The Blind Man no. 2* the day before. What we know from Camfield's examination of other sources is that the urinal was at 291 by the April 19 at the latest.

Duchamp also confided to Cabanne that he " had written the name 'Mutt' on the urinal to avoid the connection to the personal", which requires us to believe that before he did so the urinal was somehow more personal. The opposite would seem to make more sense, since there is nothing less personal than a mass-produced object, such as a urinal one might piss into only once in one's entire life.

In his dotage, for the loquacious but mutable Duchamp, who knew that the author of the urinal was not a mythical Mr Mutt, but one of his female friends, sometimes Mutt was a pun on the German for poverty, *armut*, according to the reasoning that this meaning of the word contrasted with the concept of wealth inscribed in the French name *Richard*, a slang expression for 'moneybags', which appeared on the urinal's entry label (but not the urinal itself.) And for Duchamp's new audience a few years before his death, 'Mutt' was also a pun on the name of the urinal suppliers in New York, Mott's Ironworks, from whom the item had allegedly been purchased, sometimes by Duchamp, sometimes Arensberg, sometimes Stella and sometimes Man Ray. The trouble with this, as Camfield's research has demonstrated, is that neither did the Mott catalogue of plumbing and sanitation fixtures contain Mr Mutt's model, but Mott didn't manufacture urinals anyway, factoring those of the Trenton sanitary ware manufacturers. So had Duchamp, or Mr Mutt, or anybody else attempted to purchase Mr Mutt's 'Mott', they would have been disappointed.

Even more problematic for the orthodox narrative into which the urinal has been plumbed is the fact that the word 'Mott' did not enter the discourse until Duchamp introduced the subject into his conversations with Cabanne in 1964, forty-seven years after the Independents had rejected it. This reference only entered the public domain in 1966, two years before Duchamp expired. This matter is examined in more detail below.

Other similar examples of this selective amnesia confirm that the aging Duchamp was not a particularly reliable witness to the events of April 1917.

The fact that the urinal was a very late entry, sent, it was generally understood, from Philadelphia, and did not appear either in the catalogue or the exhibition itself would seem to argue against any complicity on Duchamp's part with its submission. Since one might reasonably assume that had his intention been to provoke The Richard Mutt Case debate, in order to establish that it is the taste and sensibility of the artist which bestows the dignity of art on an everyday object, then he would have submitted the urinal much earlier, in order to guarantee its timely arrival and so be in a position, as a member of the committee, to influence its reception to the advantage of his alleged polemic.

Blind Man, no. 2 would feature a photograph by Stieglitz of the urinal by R Mutt rejected by the Independents which for the first time was entitled *Fountain*. But on its arrival Mr Mutt's urinal had not borne that title, or any other, either on its form or on its label; that came later. Only Duchamp was applying the term 'readymade' to ready made objects, within the avant-garde, at this time. As his letter to Suzanne tells us, he'd been doing so since just

before January 15, 1916, (and so not before,) and it is in that letter that his definition of the readymade is clearly stated; but in 1916 he says nothing about urinals.

Duchamp's definition is not that which has informed the understanding of the concept of the readymade in the history, criticism and practice of modern art, and whose perpetuation and enshrinement in orthodoxy subsequently legitimised artists to promiscuously select objects as works of art, and critics to understand them as such. The definition which did was formulated by Andre Breton in his *Phare de la Mariée* text of 1934, which clearly drew on the Arensberg defence published in the editorial of *Blind Man 2*; it is Breton's 'readymade', and not Duchamp's, which is "an ordinary object elevated to the dignity of art by the mere choice of the artist". That this definition was so well-established by the time that Duchamp's apotheosis was complete is demonstrated by the fact of his friend Claude Levi-Strauss' routine use of it in conversation with Georges Charbonnier in 1961. Informed by his long association with Breton, Levi-Strauss does not cite the example of Duchamp's urinal, but that of his exemplary bottle rack. At this date, only twice had urinals been exhibited as works of art, in the United States, by the ballroom-dancing shirt manufacturer, Sidney Janis. But Levi-Strauss says nothing about urinals.

[Breton's definition of the readymade is typically Surrealist, in that it assumes the intuitive power of the refined '*sensibilité*' of the clairvoyant artist to reveal truths otherwise hidden in the mundane from the common herd; Duchamp's legendary refusal to join the ranks of the Surrealists merely underscores the difference between Breton's definition and his own.]

By comparison, Duchamp's definition, in which he uses the term "*tout fait*" (no hyphen, note) for 'readymade', describes an object, such as a bottle rack, which he buys, signs and appends an inscription to. That's it. No elevation of ordinary objects to the dignity of art by the choice of the artist, and since no dignity of art, no artistic choice, taste or affective delectation. As Duchamp explained to his artist sister, art doesn't come into it, because the concept has nothing to do with Romanticism or Impressionism or Cubism - in other words, it's nothing to do with the avant-garde art of the previous hundred years. This Suzanne must not puzzle over too much. He identifies an example to her, a snow shovel inscribed '*In Advance of the Broken Arm*'. She must now make one for him at a "distance", by proxy, by taking the bottle rack which she will find in his rue Saint-Hippolyte studio and appending an inscription to it (subsequently 'lost' with the third page of the letter.) Unlike a work of art, it doesn't require the appending of his own signature as a guarantee of authenticity.

He had bought this bottle rack at the Bazaar de l'Hotel de Ville in 1913 as a ready made sculpture. Here the word 'ready made' serves as an adjective qualifying the substantive 'sculpture'. But now Suzanne will transform this into a substantive 'Readymade'. If a readymade was identical to a sculpture, the need to distinguish between the two genres grammatically would not arise; but it did. So in January 1916 Duchamp passed beyond finding sculptural beauty in everyday objects, such as the aircraft propellers he challenged Brancusi to emulate and surpass; he passed from the machine aesthetic to a genre requiring no choice on the part of either an artist or a viewer. He'd already given up art, in 1912. So when Duchamp tells his sister in 1917 that his female friend has submitted a urinal as a sculpture, she would know it is not a readymade, whether or not she understands what a readymade is.

It is clear both from his own definition and the history of the readymades that Duchamp's appropriation of a urinal as a readymade had no need of anybody's authorisation save his own, and certainly not the Independents, either via their judgment of a manufactured object as merely utilitarian on the self-evident grounds that it was beyond judgement as a work of art or not.

That the address written on the label attached to the urinal, clearly visible in Stieglitz' photograph, is Louise Norton's, has given rise to unconfirmed speculation that she was the real Mr Mutt. This interpretation was encouraged by Demuth's fruitless attempt, quoted by Camfield, to persuade Henry McBride to publish coverage of the *Richard Mutt Affair* in *The Sun*, and if need be to consult further, apropos the *Fountain*, with Marcel Duchamp. Demuth gives the phone number at which a 'Richard Mutte' might be contacted, as 9255 Schuyler, the number of Louise Norton. Demuth's misspelling of the name Mutt suggests he had not seen the urinal before he had entered the semantic loop.

It is a footnote appended to the entry for item 15, page 47, of *Affectueusement Marcel* that suggests that it was Louise Norton's address which appears on the label attached to the urinal in the Stieglitz photograph. But if Louise Norton, who had no reason to rock the Independents' boat, was not Mr Mutt, she could easily have been factoring for him. But why Marcel Duchamp, in New York, would send a urinal to the Independents, from a Philadelphia he wasn't in, via Louise Norton in New York, when he could send it direct and still preserve his anonymity, is not clear from this reasoning. Louise Norton's silence, which Camfield confirms was maintained to the end, sheds no light on the matter whatsoever.

The urinal's failure to be included in the catalogue, the guarantee of which had required its submission by March 28, would suggest that Mutt's expletive was not long in gestation. The urinal's very late submission, not arriving until the very day of the private opening, the 9th, would seem to confirm an essentially reactive character to the gesture, a gesture we suggest that was provoked by America's declaration of war only three days before. This of course disturbed the tranquillity of the pacifist Duchamp's existence not one whit, and he had already been quoted in the press, soon after his arrival in 1915, as saying that he had fled France because life in Paris had become so dull after war had been declared. He thus appears to be an unlikely candidate for a tilt at the Independents in reaction to the United States entering the war on the side of the French, especially with a urinal signed by an R Mutt.

“ then Elsa.”

In *Baroness Elsa: gender, dada and everyday modernity - a cultural biography*, Irene Gamel, in just falling short of an outright endorsement, proposes, via an examination of credible circumstantial evidence, just who might qualify as the author of Mutt's gesture - Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, dada personified. As Gamel argues, polemical aesthetics were literally right up the street of this Baroness-by-marriage abandoned by her aristocratic husband at the outbreak of WW1 in 1914 in New York. The main form her visual expression took was an overtly public corporeal gender-reconstruction, a feminist performance executed via aggressive public gestures which not infrequently landed her in gaol. It didn't help much that she shoplifted many of her accessories, or that she paraded nude in the street covered in little more than a Mexican blanket.

With impeccable credentials for membership of the avant-garde milieu, she knew everybody, including Louise Norton, and was, by April 1917, an intimate, of sorts, of Marcel Duchamp; too intimate, for his liking. This " fierce enemy of bourgeois convention" who 'lived' dada well in anticipation of Zurich, had participated in Dada's gestation with future members of Zurich Dada in 'Kosmiker' Schwabing some years before, at the time being married to August Endell. This was the same Schwabing which Duchamp and Katherine Dreier visited independently in 1912, that same 'Kosmiker' Schwabing that had been

preoccupied with the concept of the *Urmutter*, which Gamel examines between pages 99 and 109.

In 1918, during the period when she was the star of the *Little Review*, Elsa lived on 14th Street in New York, in, according to William Carlos Williams, the most unspeakably filthy tenement in the city. However, between 1918 and 1922 the *Little Review* published 20 of her poems, several of which took Duchamp for their subject. A major difference that she sensed between herself and Duchamp lay in their respective attitudes to New York, his ease in finding patrons a constant irritation to her failure to achieve the same. She, on the other hand, made no compromise with American life and its social conventions, viewing his accommodation to it as evidence of a shallowness on its, and his, part that she rejected; he who was jealous of her strength had succumbed to the mediocrity and superficiality of American culture. She particularly hated what she considered to be the shallowness of the American language. The relationship between Duchamp and Elsa would seem to be the pivot upon which her opinion of the Independents turned.

Gamel's characterisation on page 191 of the essence of Elsa's practice would appear to confirm an identity with Richard Mutt's gesture. Its material products were consistently characterised by a lack of permanence. Her materials were perishable. She was consumed by her art, which was literally ingested and assimilated by its audience. Her practice of art in the flesh involved the ultimate risk to her body and self. It was quite literally the daily enactment of what Gamel characterises as the *sujet en procès*. But each next ephemeral project had as much to do with making a living as making a work of art, and the misattribution of her *God*, for example, would appear to confirm a certain cavalier detachment on her part from her products' subsequent destinies. Duchamp's long talks with Elsa into the night during their occupation of the Lincoln Arcade studios would presumably have informed her of his concept of the ready-made and him fully of her proto-dada aesthetic, obviating any need for familiarity with it from any other source. So the subsequent loss or destruction of the urinal, once its aim had been achieved, would fit a practice in which works of art functioned much as props in a temporary theatrical performance, being designed, as it were, for highly specific performance and consumption environments which defined absolutely their wholly contingent meaning within very precise, unrepeatably, spatio-temporal ideological coordinates, but outside of which they meant nothing, as a little bit of New York gossip would mean nothing in the Normandy of Duchamp's birth, except perhaps to a family with New York avant-garde connections.

As Camfield notes, all early press coverage of the Richard Mutt affair locates the urinal's author in Philadelphia, the city the Baroness left New York for in the February of 1917, two months before one spring offensive apparently provoked another. The ex-pat German Baroness moved in February 1917 to a city with strong German/Dutch origins and a lively artistic community which included Demuth, Sheeler and Schamberg, all members of the Arensberg circle. She returned to New York in October.

In Philadelphia, Elsa lived on the streets in her poverty, her *armut*, bathing in the public fountains which formed part of the landscaping of the stations on the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad, and sleeping on park benches with sailors. It would therefore not seem unreasonable to consider that individuals like Demuth and Shamberger who are known to have been willing to help her financially could have easily furnished her with funds to finance the purchase and transport of Mr Mutt's urinal to New York. There may, of course, be a far simpler explanation, perfectly at one with Elsa's *modus operandum*. Since her preferred method of materials procurement appeared to be opportunistic theft she could quite simply have stolen the urinal from a building site or sanitary-ware supplier's yard. Thus America's declaration of war on Germany on April 6th suggests itself as the provocation of Mr Mutt's

gesture three days before his entry arrived at the Independents, and three days might just be the amount of time it took, in 1917, for a urinal to be transported cheaply from one address in Philadelphia to another in New York, Louis Norton's.

Gamel records on page xix of her *Chronology* that during her Pennsylvania sojourn Elsa was incarcerated for three weeks in Connecticut on suspicion of being a German spy, an action unlikely to endear her to her hosts. Earlier in the year, in January, the Baroness' patriotism had been declared at a Supreme Court divorce proceeding in which she featured. Under threat of having to give up her 'poet-lover' Douglas Gilbert Dixon, she announced that she would rather " die as good Germans had died before her."

All of this suggests that it was the anti-German atmosphere created by America's declaration of war which was the catalyst to Richard Mutt's gesture. However, the deafening silence of late May onwards marks an abrupt end to the affair as it was conducted between the pages of avant-garde rags, as the tenor of the times would suggest it sensibly might, certainly to a self-declared pacifist and anti-patriotic alien of fighting age such as Duchamp, who notably left New York in 1918 at about the time conscription laws threatening individuals of his hitherto protected status were being drawn up. But the affair's going off the boil could equally be simply the result of the instigator of this contingent, throw-away gesture being out of town and frying other fish. She'd made her point, for what it was worth, and moved on to something more pressing, something as trivial to members of the Arensberg charmed circle as mere survival in the gutter. Removed from the Arensberg salon with its endless *éclair*s and chess, and Lou playing Chopin, and Varèse breaking his leg; from its French lessons and dinners at Polly's or the Brevoort, where one could speak French and listen to the espionage: from its *gigots* stolen from Gleizes' fridge, and its Rogue's Balls - oh, and from Fania playing in the latest Belasco, on Broadway, of course - and what not: once removed from there, and chucked out with garbage, Mr Mutt's gesture takes on a different pallor. That Duchamp's proclaimed anti-patriotic, anti-militaristic stance and the Independents' pro-American sentiments contrasted strongly with Elsa's anti-American, pro-German visceral inclinations would then seem to argue for her authorship of Mr Mutt's urinal rather than his.

The American Society of Independent Artists was notoriously distinguished by a contingent intent on modelling itself after the French example. Since it thus represented what Elsa most despised about avant-garde New York, particularly the way the masculinist French contingent were sucking-up to the locals, the first exhibition of the Independents was clearly an ideal target, unanticipated but fortuitously contingent for a critique of a mendacity which Duchamp himself could be construed to be demonstrating in the pursuit of a self-interest not notably available to Elsa. But it was Elsa who was in a position to know just how powerful the most common German phrase containing the word *armut* might be in these contingent circumstances, a phrase which reads, in respect of the homophonic R Mutt's appellation, as follows: "*Jemandem ein armutszeugnis ausstellen*". This means, conventionally, 'to give a poor account of oneself'. Put another way, which sounds exactly the same, it reads: "*Jemandem ein R Mutt's zeugnis ausstellen*", which translates literally as, inter alia, 'for somebody to exhibit admissible evidence of R Mutt', to which the label, still attached in Stieglitz' photograph, attests. The homophonic potential of this phrase "*Jemandem ein armutszeugnis ausstellen*", the very phrase one would be required to use if one sought to express one's contempt, would then appear to be key to the understanding of just who was responsible for Mutt's polemical gesture, since it locates it plausibly within the propitious conjunction of a motivation, production and target audience.

That the effect of the pun, *armut* / *R Mutt*, on which the strategy turned depended on its homophonic character underscores the linguistic grounding of this conceptually elegant

polemical intervention. Elsa's s qualification is beyond doubt, her literary output revealing a pungently sophisticated German-American wordsmith not a bit like those hyphenated Germans with their split loyalties - Arensberg, Dreier, Van Vechten, Stieglitz and so on. The Baroness' capacity for 'Franglo - German' wordplay is not in doubt, as her poem *Herr Peu à Peu*, demonstrates. Thus the late submission of a urinal brought into propitious conjunction the two spring offensives of the Independents' opening and America's declaration of war on Germany a few days before. Its target had been selected specifically from within the avant-garde milieu of its author. Out of New York on the day war was declared, and in full spate, Elsa would have had no time to both procure an entry form and submit the item in time to meet the submission deadline. But Louise Norton would have been in a position to do so, and it was her address on the label. Of course, the offensiveness of an unsigned urinal would alone have been sufficient to guarantee rejection by the committee on the grounds that Bellows cited, making the signature ostensibly redundant. Yet there it is, the key to the urinal's conceptual integrity, because the signature of the protagonist, R Mutt, whilst not participating in that rejection by the committee, brings into play the pun which actually inscribes the dilemma enshrined in the rules, to show or not to show, at least to a German speaker defaulting in rage into expletives ejaculated in her ancestral tongue. Without the homophonic coincidence inscribed in the submitting artist's name there is no pun on *armut*, and thus no phrase containing it, and thus no point to the submission, and thus no dilemma inscribed in the gesture. The name Richard, found only on the label, and written in a long hand belonging to neither Elsa nor to Marcel, has nothing to do with it, but rather to the urinal's reincarnation as a fountain. The committee neither objected to the name nor doubted the existence of its nominee. What they did object to was the identity, not the shape, of the item that had been submitted.

This is how Elsa's gesture worked.

Jemandem means somebody, the anonymous nobody – some mutt - whose identity the *zeugnis* bears, signified here in the form of this label, an *etikett*, since *zeugnis* means both evidence and testimony, which the signed label was; and the homonym of *etikett*, *etikette*, meaning etiquette, or decorum, is, of course, at the heart of the exercise. The verb *ausstellen* means to exhibit or show, which the submitting artist was ostensibly guaranteed merely through payment of the fee, and which etiquette now demanded. But it also means to betray, which caught the exhibiting committee, whatever their decision, for in exhibiting an offensive urinal as a work of art they simultaneously exhibited their aesthetic incompetence, betraying the paucity - *armut* - of their taste. But to not exhibit betrayed the poverty - *armut* - of their exhibiting (*ausstellung*) policy, breaking their own rules of etiquette. Thus, caught on the horns of a dilemma of their own making, to exhibit evidence of R Mutt, *jemandem ein R Mutt's zeugnis ausstellen*, was simultaneously to *jemandem ein armutszeugnis ausstellen*, to give a poor account themselves, to betray their incompetence, and to exhibit their deficiencies; to accept the award of a certificate of incompetence, in the form of the label. The beauty of the gesture lies in the fact that to reject and accept meant the same thing - incompetence.

And *ausstellen* also means to plumb, to install such bathroom fixtures as urinals.

Of course, any non-German speaker on the committee would be unaware of the plumbing trap they were falling into, and no hint of any suspicion of this danger is betrayed in the committee's reported conversation, all of which could be seen as grist to Elsa's contemptuous mill, since their incomprehension would betray their lack of qualification for the job – the mutts - unable either to accept a work of art on its own terms or to recognise it a fraud. But to understand would hoist them on their own petard in the form of the logical

inconsistency of their own self-imposed rules. Amongst all the usual suspects, only the native German-speaking, grindingly poor (*armut*) and marginalised Elsa had any real motive for such a gesture against what she saw as the cultural *armut* (barrenness, sterility, destitution and poverty) of the committee whose rules Duchamp drew up, advocated and supported in his alphabetical hanging of the show beginning with "R for art". Beatrice Wood's diary casts some light here. It records that on April 7, the day after America declared war on Germany, Wood lunched with Roché, during which they discussed "Richard Mutt's exhibition" – two days before the urinal was received by the Independents' committee.

Duchamp was not present and Wood does not mention a urinal.

This is the earliest record of the name Mutt in the affair, demonstrating that the name was not uttered until after the declaration of war. Whilst Wood does not record whether or not she and Roché discussed the declaration of war, it would seem unlikely that this would not have been a matter for discussion amongst the members of the milieu to which Norton, Wood and Elsa belonged. It seems therefore perfectly feasible that an incandescent Elsa, on learning of the declaration, telephoned Norton and informed her to expect to receive a urinal she wished to submit anonymously to the Independents as a sculpture under a male pseudonym, R Mutt.

And it would seem equally feasible that Norton, whilst protecting the desire for anonymity which Duchamp had noted and honoured in his letter, would convey this little piece of gossip to those of her friends involved with the Independents; Elsa had a reputation for being difficult if you disagreed with her. To what extent anyone would have given this as much as a second thought is qualified by Elsa's marginalisation and reputation as something of an irritating crank. The choice of a urinal then seems singularly appropriate to Elsa's aesthetic, since by the late 19th century, a urinal was affectionately known, in the U.S.A, as a 'pissier', which also meant penis and, transitively, anything phallic. Therefore, a urinal was both linguistically and functionally synonymous with any dick who cared to use one. Elsa was used to waving a dick in the faces of the middle-classes, hence the 'R' for Richard, a diminutive 'Dick' which is a synonym of 'mutt'. Further, since the 17th century, to piss on someone had been common usage in America for dismissal or treatment with contempt, and to defile and violate.

By 1900 to plumb meant to fool and deceive; that it also meant, then as now, to install plumbing fixtures would seem singularly apposite, since an installation is an *ausstellung*, an exhibition such as that which Mr Mutt's urinal was not to be plumbed-in to. Plumbing also means to plumb the depths in order to find out just how much danger you are in, either of getting out of your depth or of running aground.

Thus Elsa's choice of a plumbing fixture in general, and a urinal in particular, would seem not so much ideal or inevitable but truly inspired. Its form fitted neatly into the formalism of much of Elsa's *facture* and *matière* as described by George Biddle, the artist for whom she had posed during her sojourn in Philadelphia in 1917, and to whom she wrote during his contribution to the hostilities of that other armoury show, the one across the Atlantic that Duchamp was avoiding. Biddle reported on the condition of the 14th Street studio in which Elsa settled after the October of 1917 which, Gamel notes, contained,

" old bits of ironware, automobile tyres, gilded vegetables, a dozen starved dogs, celluloid paintings, ash cans, every conceivable horror which to her tortured, yet highly sensitive, perception became objects of formal beauty. (My underlining) And, except for the sinister and tragic setting, it had to me quite as much authenticity as, or instance, Brancusi's studio in Paris, that of Picabia, or the many exhibitions of children's work, lunatics' work, or dadaist and surrealist shows which in their turn absorb the New York and Paris intellectuals".

So either way the Independents' response would give evidence of the poverty of the taste not of the urinal's author but their own; this was the point they would miss - through their stupidity - mutts that they were - as they had missed the point of all of Elsa's work. Therefore, if the most likely author of the urinal subsequently known as *Fountain*, Elsa, was out of New York between February and October 1917, and if Duchamp, having played no part in the rejection of the urinal, was merely a collaborator in the management of *The Richard Mutt Case* itself buried in the general press by America's coincidental entry into World War 1, it is hardly surprising that this squib unerringly launched at the avant-garde establishment by the uncompromising and prickly outsider, the Baroness, fizzled out.

The polemical edge to Elsa's authorship of Mr Mutt's gesture would appear to conform to the pattern and type of attitude she openly expressed towards the avant-garde establishment in general, and particularly slightly later. On page 283, Gamel notes that, excluded from the world of art, she resorted to guerrilla interventions into modern art exhibitions, such as that which Louis Bouché organised at the Belmaison Gallery in 1922. After 're-hanging' the whole show, she harangued "with unmeasured violence the sheep-like crowd below", who she considered had merely attended in order to receive their "homeopathic dose of modernity". By the time she'd finished, some works were upside down, and others face down on the carpet, "and she was now inveighing in the most truculent manner against the bourgeois spirit of a department store which, in hanging modern art, had achieved the uninspired symmetry of a parking lot.

Finally, towards the end of almost a decade in New York, the Baroness "was forced to admit that America had refused to sustain her". Admitting that she starved without money, she could not support her art. She hated the country and longed for Paris, to which she was shortly to return, unable to produce, or cater for the vulgarity of an America whose democracy was merely "a principle of weak-gutted-ness." Dying in Paris in 1927, Elsa was conveniently out of the way in 1945 when the Duchamp myth-machine began to crank up. And it hadn't done any harm for Duchamp to have been invited to 'edit' her archive in preparation for its donation to a public archive just before. It is notable that while Elsa and Stieglitz were alive, Duchamp took care not to claim authorship of the urinal directly. This possible winnowing of Elsa's records was not untypical of Duchamp, since he is on record as having exercised the same liberty over items from the estate of both Mary Reynolds and Katherine Dreier, two individuals whose generosity towards him had been critical to his productive life.

This proposed reattribution of the urinal to Elsa's authorship would not seem gratuitous in the face of another miscarriage of justice only recently rectified by Francis Naumann, the misattribution of Elsa's authorship of *God* to Schamberg. Both, we can now suggest, were the result of Elsa having been written out of the 'official' history of the boy's club, Dada - or rather, of never having been written-in in the first place. The symmetry between what now appear to be pendants, *God* and *Fountain*, arises from both items having been chosen by one person and photographed by another, both against a background works of art by other artists. The first is a plumbing trap, or u-bend, and the second is a urinal, two items routinely attached to each other, in plumber's showrooms and in bathrooms. Given the standardisation in plumbing fixtures in America in 1917, they probably were attached to each other at the moment Elsa liberated them from their sanitary destiny in a builder's yard.

Schamberg photographed Elsa's *God* against a backdrop of his own machine paintings in the same year that Stieglitz photographed the *Fountain*, an inverted urinal, against Hartley's painting *Warriors*. And the two works reciprocate further, in terms of their destiny, since *God* ended up in the Arensberg collection, attributed to Schamberg, and Mr Mutt's

urinal ended its final days hanging from a ceiling in a studio that Arensberg loaned to Duchamp. Further, it is obvious that the inscription on the urinal and the signature on its label are not by the same hand. The handwriting on the label bears no correspondence to Duchamp's normal hand, as represented in, say, any of his notes in the *Green Box*, or his inscription on *The Non-Dada*. Neither does it match Elsa's, but the letters printed on the urinal do closely resemble those of the Baroness' commonly printed script. Gamel publishes a number of examples of her literature and poetry, such as her letter to Djuna Barnes, illustration 14.5 on page 382, which shows strong correlations between the style of lettering on the urinal and that of her own printed script. Further, the T's of Mutt correspond closely to those in her poem "*Teke*", illustrated as item 11.7, on page 297, and the letters R and M on the urinal seem close to those in the script appended to her portrait of the Baron himself, on page 162.

Since Duchamp knew the true identity of the urinal's author - the female friend he informs his sister of - he was in a position to know Elsa's precise attitude towards the work, and thus able to judge the latitude of manoeuvre he might enjoy apropos a subsequent appropriation of it, which is a matter of record, since it can be seen hanging from the ceiling of the 33 West 69th St studio ceiling, en ensemble, in photographs taken *after* April 1917. Since the materials Elsa habitually used in her work were virtually worthless, invariably either found or stolen, and the works assembled from them habitually disposable, their components frequently recycled, it would seem reasonable for anyone who knew her to suppose that, once having made her gesture she would, as usual, move swiftly on to the next ephemeral project. Thus Duchamp could appropriate with impunity, which he did, later, but not a work of art, since the Independents had declared Mr Mutt's urinal to be a mere utilitarian article, as were all of Duchamp's other ready mades, all designated for Walter Conrad Arensberg. Elsa was out of town, perhaps never to come back, and out of sight and out of mind. But she, of all the protagonists of the avant-garde milieu of New York, has more claim to motive, weapon and opportunity for the submission of Mutt's piss-taker than most. Certainly more than Duchamp, who continued until the end of his life to gain nothing but benefit from membership of a rather exclusive homo-social club that she could never join. Thus Elsa's shameless effrontery and open disregard for decorum and morality would appear to most recommend her as the *eminence grise* behind Mr Mutt's gesture, since shameless effrontery and open disregard for decorum and morality exemplify an audacity which translates as the *wagemut* which characterises Elsa's challenge to the Independents, a daring and boldness which in German translates - surprise, surprise - as *mut*.

And of course Elsa's immaculate polemic has no role for the word 'Fountain'. Nor, for what it's worth, for Mott. Mott actually enters the discourse not in 1917 but rather late in the day - very late in Duchamp's life in fact, in 1964, during a conversation with Arturo Schwartz, first noted, on page 650 of his 1997 revised and expanded *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, being first published in *Art and Artists* in 1966. (vol. 1, no. 4. July: Otto Hahn, "Passport No. G255300. p 10." 0

But it's an ill wind, since there is also a beneficiary of this conflict, in that the judgement by the art establishment in 2004 which found Duchamp's urinal to be the most influential work of art of all time, in appearing to have been based on a misattribution, thus reinstates the urinal's true author.

Clearly, the reputation of the purest Dada iconoclast of them all rests fairly and squarely on who owned Mutt's legacy - and that was Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven.