

INSIDE THE PEARL II: *Infra-mince*, the Message in Miniature (Conceptual Commodities and N-Dimensional Translation)

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"When you are looking at the originals, you seem to be looking at the copies; and when you are looking at the copies, you seem to be looking at the originals."
—Henry James (on seventeenth-century Dutch landscapes)

The originals of several of Marcel Duchamp's Readymades were lost in the years following their "nomination." *Hatrack* (1917) presents a particularly interesting case, as the few surviving photographs of the object—along with the depiction of its shadow in the painting *Tu m'* (1918) and a 1964 version (which Duchamp called a "blueprint") that fails to match later copies made under the artist's supervision—appear to contradict one another.

These may have been incidental optical inconsistencies. It's possible that Duchamp, with his fast-moving, multivalent intellect, merely overlooked details he found unimportant. At times he speaks as though the chance encounter was definitive—as if a certain object possessed the precise features he sought—but those very features, which often amounted to an ideal "mass-produced" interchangeability or blandness, may suggest that what mattered

to him most was this very lack of specificity. (In his notes from *The Green Box*, Duchamp names "the important thing" in his selection of Readymades as "this matter of timing, this snapshot effect.") He was a scrupulous

self-archivist who saved even the briefest of notes jotted down in passing if it related to his work on *The Large Glass* (1915-23). Eventually, he compressed his complete oeuvre (including notes he had lost, recreated with exacting fidelity—down to the kind of paper used—from photographs) into his *Boîte-en-valise* (1935-41): a piece that was itself remade across several color-coded series. The *cosa mentale*, or the process by which thought manifests in the tangible world, was of paramount importance. He spent years recording data produced by his own mental life. What, in the end, constitutes material information?

Duchamp, a chess master, approached the game of artmaking with a scientist's rigor and a trickster's spirit. Instinct tells me this spirit was set to work here. The differences (wooden *Hatrack* "reproductions" with three of their hooks reversed, five rather than ten holes in a urinal's basin) add up, but to what?

In *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, Linda Dalrymple Henderson describes how artists of Duchamp's time responded to their rapidly expanding technological ecosystem by producing innovative braided vocabularies that combined references to science, mathematics, and mysticism. Along with his fellow modernists, Duchamp perceived a new world driven by innovation that demanded a break with the aesthetic past. T.J. Clark and others have suggested that novel art objects both reflected and inspired ways of seeing in dimensions defined by Karl Marx's model of commodity analysis. Duchamp was one of many who felt that a new kind of metaphysics was at hand; he was initially drawn to popular mathematical theories (he favored Henri Poincaré) and speculations around the concept of the fourth dimension. But these ideas served as a launchpad for his own idiosyncratic concerns, which he autologically compressed into his concept of *infra-mince*, or "ultra-thin."

Duchamp refuses to define *infra-mince* in favor of deriving it empirically through sensory description: the shifting iridescence of silk fabric, the plane of reflection in a mirror, the warmth of a recently vacated seat. These instances represent relational traces of motion or interaction,

velleities hovering at the edge of three-dimensional space. In dialogue with Pierre Cabanne, the artist states that "through the *infra-mince* it is possible to pass from the second to the third dimension." In other words, *infra-mince* quantities allow perception to slip through similarly *infra-mince* dimensional limits: per Duchamp himself, the cavity between the front and back of a sheet of paper; or, in a more contemporary setting, the presence of the glass television screen revealed by Gretchen Bender's superimposition of vinyl lettering in her 1986-91 series *TV Text and Image*. Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs* (1935), two-dimensional lithograph discs that produce a three-dimensional illusion when spun at 40-60 rpm, provide a relatively simple example of his optical experiments with inter-dimensional translation.

In *Boîte-en-valise*, Duchamp condenses his practice into a portable miniature that, as Ecke Bonk notes, "simulates the horizontals and verticals of a room, perfectly to scale." By establishing a kind of "museum without walls" (to borrow André Malraux's phrase) that enabled the artist to curate and display mobile, "lossy" versions of his materialized ideas—squeezing essential attars from his full-size artworks while recontextualizing them in a kind of matrix: an array containing flattened descriptions of three-dimensional

items—he proposes a recursive argument for the creative potential of reproduction.

Duchamp's compression echoes Claude Lévi-Strauss's depiction of miniaturization as a synthetic fusion of inner and outer knowledge about an object: a bricolage of multiple views—impossible in three-dimensional space, but possible in the extra-dimensional imagination—rather than a simple simulacrum. In line with Henderson's reading of Stuart Davis and other cubists, simultaneous presentations of contradictory images (temporally, as in Turner's *Cologne* (1826) and Duchamp's 1912 *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*; or perspectively, as in Vermeer's 1659–61 aggregate *View of Delft*, M.C. Escher's mid-century lithographs, and many of Duchamp's later works) that visualize motion and delay in “still images” have always implicitly contained these possibilities. As seen through *The Large Glass*, Duchamp's *cosa mentale* originates in this erotic dimension of deferral: more of a sexual act than the act of sex itself.

In Karl Marx's model of commodity fetishism, the “mystical character” of an object indicates the presence of an external dimension crucially generated by consumer appetite. Though this phantasmagoria never fully arrives in three dimensions, the fantasy masks the realities of the object's production.

An associative, intuitive, Symbolist poetics of indefinable qualities, at once language-generated and language-transcending, lurks somewhere in Duchamp's intellectual substrate. Objects lose their static dependence on three-dimensional limits and, like Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic elements or Marx's commodities, become indexical, fungible ciphers. Viewed this way, the Readymades expose the framework that undergirds our image of reality, blurring together—at least in concept—the media of earlier eras with the artificially generated content of today.

In his 1997 documentary *Still Life*, Harun Farocki observes a line of continuity between the staging of modern advertisements and the presentation of consumer goods in seventeenth-century Netherlandish painting. This latter development coincided with the local introduction of the word “fetish” through trade networks. This term—which originally described the attribution of divinity to certain objects in coastal African societies—was soon pirated by Enlightenment

philosophy, which context it came to designate (as Farocki puts it) “something that does not have to exist, but has the power to refer to something.”

Vermeer painted his pearls to appear more ideally pearly than the glass or silver imitations that would have been available to his subjects. His famous *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (c. 1665) was not a portrait but rather a *tronie*, a representative character study or Platonic archetype. These artworks—like the still lifes to which Farocki refers—were advertisements for a Dutch national identity consolidated in a moment of shifting global order: idealizations, associated with a merchant class, whose desirability was inseparable from their circulation as images.

Today this circulation takes place online, on virtual platforms generated by mathematical engines projecting three-dimensional models onto two-dimensional screens. Like the screen itself, the illusive, elusive, *infra-mince* gap between the presented commodity-object and the literal materiality of the object enables a matrical expansion via compression: multiplied by contextual, informatic cofactors, symbols point to larger real-world referents.

Reduction triggers mechanisms of seduction. As with an art object, an advertised image is always slightly warm from the residual heat of projection: the shiny value proposition reflected upon it from the fourth dimension of incomplete desire, composite essences, and discursive functions.

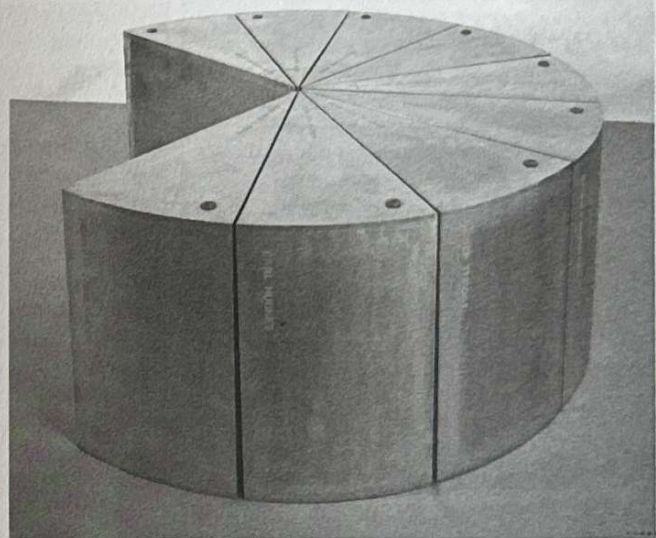
See, for example, Michael Joo's *Slanty, the Angle of Identification* (1991–92): a hollow aluminum pie chart composed of equally sized wedges, each of which represents a public figure's canthal tilt matching that of Joo's right eye. In 1991, these data points—a representational, commodified assemblage of individuals (including “Marilyn Chambers,” “Deep Throat,” and “Mr. Goodwrench”) reduced to the shared common denominator of a single angle—demonstrated that there is no consistent difference between “Eastern” and “Western” facial morphology. In the expanded field of the year 2026, the work's individual segments have been pulled slightly away from one another: a material introduction of *infra-mince* that tracks new valences of meaning in the context of online *looksmaxxing* discourse, which deems a positive canthal tilt an “essential” component of desirability, or the advertisement of the self.

Joo's *Concatenations* (1991/2026), originally conceived for an unrealized exhibition at White Columns, appeared alongside *Slanty* in the

exhibition *Sweat Models 1991–2026*.¹ Instead of adhering to his original proposal from the 90s—an assemblage of medical forms and tools meant to visualize the entanglement of healthcare and information systems—Joo places significant found and mass-produced objects alongside smaller works by his friends (Kara Walker, Carol Bove, and more) in a structure composed of metal cafeteria trays arrayed to resemble the results of a PCR test: an analog representation of a personal archive upon which, one imagines, an artificial intelligence might someday be trained. The exhibition text to *Sweat Models* states that “Joo seeks to present the body—and more broadly, society—as a kind of ‘shimmer,’ something that moves too fast to fully measure and with more depth and dimension that can be comprehended.”

As Hito Steyerl observed after a recent screening of her 2013 video work *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, documentary images have lost the power to describe a reality that seems to require—more than ever before—the development of extra-dimensional methods of understanding. Duchamp's elision of boundaries between art and vernacular objects points back to the same n-dimensional geometry that characterizes his image manipulation; he categorizes the “practical approximation of similarity in mass-production” as *infra-mince*. As art objects, then, the Readymades are commodities positioned to discursively interrogate their own identities.

Does the ideal archetype—even the archetypal blandness that drew Duchamp's attention—Platonically precede the object? Or does it emerge retroactively—for a viewer—from the compilation of its instances? Presented as a work entire, Duchamp's *Hatrack* functions as a microcosmic metaphor for the tension between theory and praxis: inherent essences vs. mutable realities, conceptual mathematics vs. empirical science. The ineffable concept of a hatrack (an abstract quality Rhonda Roland Shearer calls



Michael Joo, *Slanty, the Angle of Identification*, 1991–92, Aluminum and synthetic tears.

“hatrackiness,” which roughly maps onto the idea or prototype of a thing before it becomes a consumer object) is strung up against an evolving series of iterations.

Encountered possibilities coexist in a subjective stasis inflected by personal perspective—closer to the accumulative “mobile eye” Svetlana Alpers identifies in seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painting, or Turner's durational equivalent—than to the limited experience of “sovereign” perspective from a fixed vantage point. These ideas take on new relevance in the age of AI, when images that are neither originals nor copies nor simulacra can be generated at the touch of a button. If we attempt to locate the source of an AI-generated image, we must reckon with a sea of data so vast that it renders the existing language of “composite” imagery inadequate.

What is clear is that this system runs on desire. Algorithms amplify Marxist fetishism to the nth degree. (As Trevor Paglen remarked at the launch of his new book *How to See Like a Machine*, “Computer vision is not looking for objects but for commodities.”) The feedback loop between the interface that dictates perception and the viewer's choice twists ever tighter. Averages blur into ideals as countless snapshot indications—clicks, likes, posts—are miniaturized into a crystallized-desired object primed to circulate in the fourth-dimensional space of a platform economy polishing away the ultra-thin line between commodity and fantasy. Still, the pearl was always painted. ■

¹ *Sweat Models* (1991–2026) at Space ZeroOne (February 20–April 18, 2026)