

SMPLECTY

Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art



SAMUEL ALEXANDER

Essays on the Aesthetics of Existence

The Cosmos as a 'Readymade': Dignifying the Aesthetic Universe

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‘For the nature of humanity is art. Everything for which there is a predisposition in our existence can and must in time become art.’

– ***Johann Gottfried von Herder***

The Cosmos as a ‘Readymade’: Dignifying the Aesthetic Universe

Samuel Alexander

In 1917 a revolution took place that would change the world forever – not in the domain of politics, as one might assume, but in the world of art. The Bolshevik revolution will be remembered for centuries to come, but when Marcel Duchamp anonymously submitted an ordinary, mass-produced urinal to be exhibited by the Society of Independent Artists in New York, he immortalised himself and his provocative gesture. The story is a critical page in twentieth-century history. The Society of Independent Artists, which Duchamp had helped establish, was to hold an exhibition in the spirit of democratising art. Any artist who paid the very modest submission fee could have their work exhibited. The slogan of the exhibition was ‘No Jury – No Prizes’, alluding to the radically inclusive and non-hierarchical vision of the event. Despite this liberal platform, Duchamp’s submission – entitled *Fountain* and signed ‘R. Mutt 1917’ – was rejected, or, in Duchamp’s words, ‘supressed’.¹ The board refused to exhibit it on the grounds of it being ‘indecent’ and ‘not art’.² Feigning outrage, Duchamp was delighted, resigning from the board in protest.

It is too early to tell whether this event was ultimately a positive intervention in the narrative of art history. But the questions Duchamp raised are unlikely to be forgotten, forever haunting art with a picture of its ambiguous self-image. Merely to call *Fountain* a ‘joke’ is to do injustice to the profundity of Duchamp’s gesture, although by choosing a urinal he was clearly trying to ‘take the piss’ out of the artworld – or rather, bring it into the artworld. It was an act rivalled only by Piero Manzoni who, in 1961, exhibited cans of his own excrement. In relation to these provocations, Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* of 1964 – which were virtually indistinguishable from the ordinary commercial packaging they copied – were positively tame. Nevertheless, each case raises the niggling question: but is it art?

Duchamp’s striking innovation was to select ordinary, mundane items specifically for their aesthetic neutrality or lack of beauty – something ‘readymade’, as he would call these manufactured objects – and declare them art. His intention was to shatter artistic conventions and traditions in the most fundamental way. By displaying readymade items like bicycle wheels, snow shovels, combs, and urinals, art came to imitate life as never before, such that the very distinction between art and life could no longer be taken for granted. Indeed, the analytical task of answering the question ‘What is art?’ has never been the same. Although the Society of Independent Artists rejected *Fountain* as ‘not art’, a replica of the work now resides in the Tate Modern (the original was lost), and in 2004 a panel of five hundred art experts declared it the most influential artwork of the twentieth century.

So is *Fountain* art? The question doesn’t seem to get old, even though it has been analysed to death – or eternal life – over the last century. To answer this question, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein would have said: ‘Don’t think, but look!’³ The point is that our answer to whether something is art will not be found in conceptual analysis, for the concept of art is radically

indeterminate;⁴ it is an ‘essentially contested’ term for which necessary and sufficient conditions cannot be provided.⁵ As philosopher of art Morris Weitz wrote:

If we actually look and see what it is that we call ‘art’, we will also find no common properties – only strands of similarities... ‘Art’ itself is an open concept. New conditions (cases) have constantly arisen and will doubtless constantly arise; new art forms, new movements, will emerge... Aestheticians may lay down similarity conditions but never necessary and sufficient ones for the correct application of the concept.⁶

From this influential Wittgensteinian perspective, identifying art can only be achieved by observing whether something is actually *treated as art* in social practice and discourse; that is to say, ‘whatever convention allows to be an artwork is an artwork.’⁷ On those terms – a version of which philosopher George Dickie called the ‘institutional theory of art’⁸ – the answer is clear: yes, *Fountain* is, or has become, art. It has been thoroughly institutionalised by the collectors, curators, and critics of the ‘artworld,’⁹ even if the installation remains reviled as often as it is revered. Where some saw sheer arrogance and inanity, others saw a stimulating and revolutionary ‘transfiguration of the commonplace’.¹⁰

Whatever one’s personal view may be, Duchamp’s provocation caused a crisis within the artworld from which it has never fully recovered, subjecting ‘modern art’ (in the scariest of scare quotes) to a barrage of mocking critique from those who no longer knew what to think. Is modern art only worth urinating on? The crisis is ruthlessly highlighted by a cartoon from the *New Yorker*, which depicts a gathering of art aficionados staring intently at a gridded square on a museum wall. The punchline is delivered by the security guards, one of whom whispers to the other: ‘I’m not going to be the one to tell them it’s a heating vent.’ To be sure, visiting galleries was easier when the nature of art seemed self-evident, and for most of ‘art history’ that was the case. Those days, however, are forever gone – a Duchampian rubicon has been crossed. Perhaps it is better to embrace this ambiguous, unsettling reality than to live with regret or contempt about questions having been asked that cannot be unasked.

Duchamp’s gesture has enduring significance for two primary reasons. First, it invites us to recognise that there is, or could be, aesthetic or artistic value in literally *anything*. Some people who have viewed the famous urinal have commented on its wonderful, flowing curves, and noticed how beautifully the light is reflected off the white porcelain. Even if this aesthetic reaction was not Duchamp’s goal or intention,¹¹ who could deny people the pleasures of such experiences if *Fountain* happened to induce them? Beauty seems to be in the eye of the beholder, challenging us to explore the possibility that aesthetic value might be more present in our lives than we commonly think, if only we would adopt the aesthetic perspective more readily. Readers might remember the story that went viral on the internet in 2007 about the unassuming violinist who played Bach in a Washington subway one winter morning. People rushed by to get to work on time, occasionally throwing the performer a dollar or two but without slowing down. The individual who paid the most attention was a three-year-old boy, who was quickly tugged along by his mother who impatiently had somewhere to be. The violinist happened to be Joshua Bell, one of the world’s most accomplished violinists, who was playing an instrument worth three and half million dollars. A few days before he had sold out a Boston theatre at \$100 a seat.

The point is not to compare the beauty of this violinist's music to the aesthetic qualities of *Fountain*, but to remind ourselves that beauty might be almost anywhere, even everywhere, if only we take the time to look for it. It is a call to adopt the aesthetic attitude or disposition and be open to absorbing what the world is waiting to offer us. If we miss a virtuoso performing before our very eyes, on account of being too hurried by the demands of modern life, what else might we be missing? Ralph Waldo Emerson once pondered how people would react if the stars at night only showed themselves once every thousand years.¹² Surely the entire species would gather for such a viewing and be overwhelmed by the 'envoys of beauty'¹³ that were on display. And yet, we have access to the sublime vista of the stars every clear night, so easily taken for granted, all the while many of us complain, not without some justification, that the world is all too ugly. Something has gone astray if our modes of existence filter away our ordinary and everyday access to beauty and the sublime. As I will suggest in this collection of essays, perhaps we find ourselves suffering from an 'aesthetic deficit disorder', but without knowing it – for the only evidence is absence.

The second reason *Fountain* caused such a stir was because it contradicted the almost universally held assumption that art had to be, if not beautiful, then at least expressive of some refined aesthetic skill through the act of creation. But in the case of the urinal, it was merely purchased from a manufacturer – 'readymade', as the artist would happily admit. The only thing Duchamp did to the very ordinary piece of plumbing hardware was to place it on its side and sign it. This raised the objection by some that *Fountain* could not be art, and if it was, then Duchamp, who did not make it, was guilty of plagiarism.

In response Duchamp declared that the artistic nature of the piece derived not from the manufacturer but from his own *selection* of that particular object as a readymade. 'An ordinary object,' he insisted, could be 'elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist.'¹⁴ So the aesthetic value of *Fountain* arose not because it was beautiful – although, as noted, some consider it to be – or that the artist showed great skill in its physical creation – Duchamp did not. Rather, *Fountain* is artistically important because of the 'meaning' that the gesture embodied. It was not intended to evoke an affective response so much as an intellectual or philosophical response – not of the body but of the mind or spirit. He was certainly not aiming to gratify the eye with beauty. In this case, and in his other readymades, Duchamp was of course provoking thought about the question: 'What is art?', inducing a radical self-consciousness in the artworld about its own identity. Perhaps it wasn't even a definitional controversy that Duchamp was trying to ignite. He said his readymades were 'neither art nor non-art. It's not the point. The point is that I wanted to go as far as I could in *doing* art.'¹⁵

This is where things get particularly interesting. If we accept that Duchamp's *Fountain*, Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, or other famous 'readymades', are art by virtue of their deep institutionalisation in the artworld, then it follows that art cannot be identified merely by examining the object through one's perceptual apparatus. After all, if *Fountain* is art, but the same urinal in the men's restroom would not be art, then something other than physical features must be what makes an artwork 'art'. Perceptual criteria cannot be provided, because two objects can be physically identical in every way, and yet, since Duchamp, we know that one of those things can be art, and the other, not art. As philosopher Arthur Danto noted dryly: 'To mistake an artwork for a real object is no great feat when an artwork is the real object one

mistakes it for.¹⁶ What matters, one might say, is whether the object is *considered from the aesthetic perspective*. If it is – by artist and/or audience – it would seem that *anything* has potential to be art and offer aesthetic value, provided it somehow embodies and expresses meaning.

Like it or not, this expansive understanding of art is Duchamp's immortal legacy, and it is lost on those who too quickly conclude that an unadorned urinal in a museum cannot be art. If, however, a readymade did *not* embody meaning in some way – say, like an ordinary Brillo Box in the supermarket – any interpretation of it as a work of art would be groundless. As Danto explained: 'A flight of birds gets read as a sign from the gods, until one stops believing in the gods, after which a flight of birds is just a flight of birds.'¹⁷ And sometimes a Brillo Box is just a Brillo Box.

The end of art?

It was reflecting upon readymade art and what distinguished these objects from 'mere real things' that led Danto to develop his 'end of art' thesis.¹⁸ This is not a claim about a loss of creative energy in the world (which may or may not be true) or that people have stopped doing art (which is obviously false). Danto's thesis is more profound. It was provoked after attending Warhol's exhibition of *Brillo Boxes* in 1964.¹⁹ To help clarify the foundations of my own position, Danto's thesis about the end of art is worth restating, even if for present purposes I must oversimplify his complex theory.

Influenced by Hegelian philosophy, Danto argued that art had been developing in a dialectical fashion over the course of history but that this process had come to an end in the twentieth century, through the likes of Duchamp and Warhol. The grand narrative can be summarised as follows. Plato offered a 'mimetic theory' of art, whereby art was treated as 'mere representation' or only an imitation of true reality. In fact, art was considered two-steps removed from reality, given that sense experience, for Plato, was merely the appearance of an underlying reality (of Forms). This rendered art a representation of a representation. On this view, what made art 'good art' was how accurately the artist was able to represent or imitate the phenomena being depicted. According to Plato, however, artists could never do that as well as philosophers, given that the latter were able to commune with the true metaphysical reality through the philosophy of Platonic Forms. Danto described this as the original 'philosophical disenfranchisement of art',²⁰ for the nature of art became defined by philosophers and demoted to the realm of mere appearance or representation. If there was beauty in the world, it lay in truth and goodness, not art. Friedrich Nietzsche would disdainfully label this view 'aesthetic Socraticism',²¹ complaining that rationality and morality did not exhaust the category of the beautiful.

Danto perceived in art history a progressive narrative, unfolding over centuries, in which artists (he focussed on painters) increasingly developed the ability to produce visual experiences effectively equivalent to those furnished by actual objects and scenes. That is, artists were getting better at depicting the world with increasing perceptual equivalence. Progress was being made. For example, artists were developing their abilities to accurately employ shadows or show perspective, progressively moving toward optical duplication of

visually perceived reality. Eventually, however, this historical process of aesthetic development came to clash with the emergence, first of photography, and then cinema. Painters were also trying to accurately represent reality, but they simply could not compete with these new technologies. According to Danto, this induced a crisis within the world of art, as artists no longer had their traditional purpose to fulfil. After all, with the invention and development of the camera in the early nineteenth century, the goal of accurately representing reality was masterfully achieved, by clicking a button. When the painter Paul Delaroche first heard about this new technology, he is reported to have declared: 'As of today, painting is dead.'²²

In true dialectical fashion, however, painters reacted by shifting the grounds upon which they stood, producing art movements like impressionism, cubism, and abstract expressionism. Abandoning the goal of accurately representing the world as it is visually perceived, artists like Monet, Picasso, and Kandinsky, began exploring less representational and more impressionistic, expressive, and abstract forms of art. These movements came to prominence because their art did *not* look like a photographed 'mirror image' of visually perceived reality. Monet was more interested in hazy moods and impressions than in the clear depiction of reality, although perhaps he was depicting an inner reality as accurately as possible. Picasso, with his cubist paintings, was not representing but re-presenting reality, through creative acts of aesthetic destruction and reconstruction. Further, Kandinsky, the pioneer of abstract art, and later Rothko, were certainly not trying to depict visually perceived reality, exploring instead what could be expressed in purely abstract statements of shape, colour, and aesthetic configuration. In abstract art, objects, as such, had disappeared entirely from such paintings. Surrealists, like Dali, took this one step further, by painting fantastical images derived purely from the imagination. If Dali was trying to 'represent' anything, it was not anything in material reality but rather, he drew inspiration from the kaleidoscopic territory of his own bizarre unconscious, accessible through dreams.

The world of art had shifted in unrecognisable ways, with artists now doing things which historically would have been unthinkable or, if they were thinkable, would not have been considered art. To oversimplify, art had moved from representation to expression, a shift that also drew more attention to the inner work of the artists. This demanded new forms of aesthetic interpretation as audiences tried to understand the meaning of a work rather than contemplate the quality of its visual representation.

This very selective, Eurocentric, and rather stylised art history leads us back to Duchamp and Warhol. As artists began exploring non-representational, more expressive forms of art, the scope of what counted as art began to expand. To cut a much longer story short, this culminated in Duchamp's readymade art, which, as I have noted, were retinally indiscernible from ordinary objects that were not art. Literally *anything* could now fall within the category of art, provided it was selected to be an art object and infused with some meaning. When Danto attended the exhibition of Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* he had an epiphany of sorts – he felt that he was witnessing the 'end of art', not in the sense that artists would stop producing art, but that art had developed to such a stage that it could not be distinguished, based on any perceptual apparatus, from what was not art. Danto's insight was that art had begun self-consciously raising questions about its philosophical identity *from within* the realm of art. This contrasts

with art being defined, as it was historically, by philosophers *from without*. The key point here is that art had begun doing philosophy, only in the medium of art, thus signifying the end of art as a separate domain defined by philosophers. Art had *become* philosophy, because artists like Duchamp and Warhol could no longer be understood aside from a theory of art that sought to make sense of what they were doing. Thus the objects of art, or rather art itself, blurred inextricably into the philosophy of art, fulfilling its Hegelian destiny as a practice that could only be comprehensible and justified in theory.

As well as art transforming itself into philosophy, Danto argued that this development represented the ‘end of art’ because artists were longer embodying some underlying historical narrative or working toward some ultimate goal (e.g., accurate representation or true expression). From this point on there would still be *change* in the artworld, but not *development* of a grand art-historical narrative. If art could be anything, and the artistic identity of a work of art could only be understood and discerned by a theory of art which gave the work some ‘meaning’, then artists had become freer than they had ever been before. By becoming philosophy, they had paradoxically freed themselves from philosophy, and this was the culmination of art’s development in history. Without a historical narrative to serve any more, artists could go in any direction they wanted – reflected in the prominence of ‘conceptual art’ or ‘performance art’ today – and Danto explained that ‘if everyone goes off in different directions, there is no longer *a* direction toward which a narrative could point.’²³

Thus the historical narrative of art’s development had been shattered into an uncontainable pluralism – as art became conscious of its own freedom – leading Danto to coin the phrase ‘post-historical’ art to refer to the pluralistic state of art after the end of art.²⁴ This phrase is not meant to imply that art will no longer be influenced by historical circumstances, but instead that historical circumstances no longer shape what can and cannot be art, since art could now be anything. The Age of Manifestos that tried to define what was ‘true art’ had come to an end, signalling the end of art as a world-historical narrative.



That end point is where my project begins. My position is based on extending Duchamp in two ways, which I can now outline. Duchamp showed that anything could be art if we adopt the aesthetic attitude when selecting and contemplating it. One might adopt such an attitude, for example, when attending a gallery exhibition, or when a friend shows you their new painting, poetry, or readymade, or when you, the artist, are in the process of creation. Duchamp’s innovation was to invite his audiences to adopt such a stance when considering ordinary, readymade objects that were intentionally lacking in beauty. The avant-garde musician John Cage made a similar move in 1952, with his piece *4’33*, during which the performing musicians made no sound at all. The point was not so much to invite the audience to enjoy the eloquence of silence, but to aesthetically contemplate the shuffling feet, coughs, and distant car horns that had the capacity to take the form of ‘music’ when the musicians themselves were silent. The audience became the art, and life itself was placed under aesthetic contemplation.

In this spirit, my first extension of Duchamp (and Cage) is to explore the possibility of adopting the aesthetic attitude *and not letting it go*; that is, to embrace the aesthetic disposition as a

‘form of life’, not merely upon entering a gallery or being presented with a work of art. After all, I contend that adopting an aesthetic attitude is a *choice* we make – try it now, you can do it. I am inviting readers to consider what the implications might be of adopting and maintaining such a perspective in ordinary, everyday life. An aesthetic perspective can be easily adopted when one is invited to do so upon the presentation of a readymade, and it is possible to adopt that perspective even when one is not presented with any work of art at all. In forthcoming essays I will argue that this voluntary existential shift has ethical, political, even spiritual implications. To the extent that certain people or movements have already called for a thorough-going aestheticism (e.g., the Dadaists and Dandies), I’ll show that their theories and practices of aestheticism, more often than not, were misconceived and misapplied. I believe they’ve given aestheticism a bad name – a name which I would like to restore.

One might immediately object that there are cases – in relation to acts of cruelty or violence, for example – where it would be wrong or inhumane to take an aesthetic attitude; where it would be wrong to admire them as aesthetic events or consider the ways in which they might be beautiful. I hope that the absurdity of such a reading militates against assuming anyone might hold such a position, even though some Surrealists, Dadaists, and Dandies were naive or reckless enough to invite such readings.²⁵ In any case, I suspect that it would be both psychologically and morally impossible for any half-decent person to seek, let alone find, beauty in cruelty, violence, or humiliation, so the objection should not have any impact in any practically relevant sense.

Nevertheless, given the absurdity of the objection, one should assume (correctly) that the theory I am putting forward must mean something else. In ways to be developed in due course, I will argue that one can defensibly maintain a particular form of aesthetic attitude, even in relation violence, for reasons of exploring *creative* strategies to stop or avoid such violence; or to consider *imaginative* ways of bringing attention to such violence in order to minimise or eliminate it; or to *redescribe* the situation in ways that highlight how the aesthetic potentials and capacities of human beings are being unjustly constrained; or, in Nietzsche’s case, to take one’s own suffering and use it creatively to *sculpt* one’s life into something noble, despite the suffering – and so forth.²⁶ These can be understood as aesthetic engagements and my point is there are ways to maintain an aesthetic stance in relation to life without implying that violence and cruelty are beautiful. In fact, in recent decades the ‘aesthetic turn’ in moral and political philosophy has shown how aesthetic perspectives are not just indispensable to ethical and political thought and practice, but unavoidable, thus blurring the conventional distinction between ethics/politics and aesthetics in ways that need not cause moral concern.²⁷

At times I will call this general position an ‘aesthetics of existence’,²⁸ a phrase borrowed from Michel Foucault, who developed an aesthetic perspective in relation to his conception of ethics as self-fashioning.²⁹ It will become clear, however, that my approach covers different territory to Foucault’s, in different ways, even as I am attempting to stand on his shoulders in the hope of seeing further. Of course, at this stage my proposition about *maintaining the aesthetic disposition* is too vague to be convincing and its implications too unclear, but I ask readers to trust that it will be given more attention. For now, I will simply return the story of the violinist in the train station. To maintain the aesthetic disposition is to adopt a frame of mind that maximises the chances of accessing beauty and sources of meaning when these aesthetic

opportunities are on offer. Additionally, this attitude would minimise the chances of being in the presence of such sources of aesthetic value but not absorbing the experiential enrichment.

My hypothesis is that the world is more beautiful and meaningful than we often appreciate, and so one of my aims in this project is to explore modes of existence that assist with the task of squeezing every drop of aesthetic value out of our lives. To be discussed further in due course, I feel an increased openness to aesthetic value is a way to minimise a society's energy and resource demands without diminishing, and indeed increasingly, quality of life. After all, one is less likely seek meaning, happiness, and beauty in consumerism if one has already found those things outside the marketplace – in the freely available aesthetic dimensions of life. I will argue that if this aesthetic method of living became a widely adopted cultural practice or disposition – that is, if we developed a *taste for degrowth* – it would have beneficial ecological, social, and personal implications. I will also argue that aesthetic experience can help develop that taste. As artist and philosopher William Morris wrote: 'that which most breeds art is art.'³⁰ This is a thesis to which I will return in later essays.

Accordingly, if you pass by a musician playing beautiful music on the street, make sure you let the experience wash over you. Don't forget that the stars are sublime and of spiritual significance, waiting humbly to enrich our lives. And, with a nod to Duchamp, don't deny the possibility that light might glimmer off the surfaces of ordinary readymade objects in ways that offer aesthetic value. An infinite number of such examples could be provided, because the sources of aesthetic value are infinite, but absorbing them depends on an openness to aesthetic experience, which is a disposition that can be mindfully embraced and refined. Opportunities to experience beauty and meaning are too important to waste. We should adopt and refine the aesthetic perspective, then, and not let it go.

My second extension of Duchamp is not to suggest that *anything* can be art, but that *everything* can be art – including, or especially, the cosmos and our place in it. After all, if Duchamp was able to dignify a urinal by aestheticising it, then I intend to claim, in the spirit of the romantic poets and philosophers, the same dignity for the universe as a whole. And why shouldn't we? Surely, of all things, the spectacle of the universe deserves the honorific 'art'. To the objection that the universe cannot be art because it was not made by the hands of a human artist, we can dissolve that objection by noting that art, since Duchamp, can be readymade.

But what could it mean to treat the cosmos as a readymade work of art? Suppose, for example, that the Society of Independent Artists announced another exhibition where anyone could show their work provided they pay a token submission fee. And suppose further that a neo-Duchampian submitted not *anything* as a readymade, but *everything*. How, you might ask, could one even submit the cosmos as a readymade? Let me borrow an example from Danto and employ it for my purposes.³¹ An artist could submit a sculpture of a bronze cat and chain it to the pedestal upon which it is exhibited. If someone asks whether this is a sculpture of a cat that happens to be chained to the pedestal (presumably to forestall theft), the artist might respond in the negative and advise that in fact it is a sculpture of a chained cat. When pressed for further detail, the artist would explain that the chain provides a bridge between art and reality – inviting the question: where does the work of art end and reality begin? At the end of the chain? At the bottom of the pedestal? At the doorway of the gallery? And so forth. The

purpose of this neo-Duchampian submission would be to create a metaphysical sandpit that swallows the entire universe, achieving the goal of transfiguring the cosmos into a work of art and thus exhibiting it as a readymade.

This ‘chained cat’ submission should suffice for my purposes, since, like Duchamp, the work of art is not so much in the object being exhibited but in the gesture of exhibiting it. My goal is to induce an aesthetic singularity of sorts – a transformation of lived experience that, once underway, cannot (and should not) be stopped. But I am not only offering an invitation to adopt an aesthetic stance in relation to a non-aesthetic universe. I wish to present an analysis of an *aesthetic universe* that deserves aesthetic attention and concern, even reverence. The following passage from Danto can be applied to help clarify this point:

We may, upon learning that an artwork is before us, adopt an attitude of respect and awe. We may treat the object differently, as we may treat differently what we took to be an old derelict upon discovering him to be the pretender to the throne, or treat with respect a piece of wood described as from the true cross when we were about to use it for kindling. These changes indeed are ‘institutional’ and social in character. Learning something to be an artwork we may, just as Dickie says, attend to its gleaming surfaces. But if what we attend to could have been attended to before the transfiguration, the only change will have been the adoption of an aesthetic stance, which we could in principle have struck before. It is a matter of merely of attending to what was there to be perceived... No: learning it is a work of art means that it has qualities to attend to which its untransfigured counterpart lacks, and that our aesthetic responses will be different. And this is not institutional, it is ontological. We are dealing with an altogether order of things.³²

I propose that orienting ourselves toward the universe as if it were a readymade work of art is a subversive act of aesthetic defiance in a world where readymades have been imposed upon us in virtually all aspects of our lives by the disenchanting logic of capitalism. As the commodification of life continues to expand, we find ourselves being sold readymade products, readymade experiences, and readymade meanings. In that light, I believe embracing the cosmos as a readymade is potentially a liberating intervention in an unfree world. Duchamp showed that how we respond to a urinal depends on whether we see it as a work of art – and that this aesthetic perspective depends on whether an artist says it is a work of art. On that basis, the same logic surely can apply to the universe as a whole. If we see this cosmos as a readymade, as per my invitation, and that life within this meta-readymade is inherently aesthetic, how might we respond differently to this aesthetic being-in-the-world? I would like to explore the implications of this gesture and take the perspective to its logical extreme, if only to see what might happen by doing so. My bold hypothesis is that this process might help set our species free, and help make the world more beautiful, just, and sustainable, in ways to be explained and explored.

To summarise: in this collection of essays I will adopt an aesthetic stance in relation to the universe and our place in it. I am inviting readers to consider the universe as a readymade in which we are living, thereby bestowing upon it the privileged status of art. My goal is to explore the consequences of doing so. My extensions of Duchamp might be deemed ‘absurd’, but it will become clear in later essays that it is absurd more in line with the work of Samuel Beckett or

Albert Camus than the sense evoked by the Dadaists. This transfiguration of the cosmos doesn't involve changing any of the physical characters of the object under consideration but rather, it involves changing its ontological character through redescription in ways that call on individuals to engage with the object differently. The *experience* of art is less about an objective encounter with a physical entity and more about poetic engagement with the possibilities of meaning that surround the entity under aesthetic contemplation – in this case, the universe itself.

In the next essay I will develop my proposal that our readymade universe is the product of a primordial 'Will to Art' that is always and everywhere at work in the cosmos, like gravity. This is not an institutional claim but an ontological one, albeit one grounded in metaphor rather than metaphysics. Those theses, and many others, will be presented in the essays that follow, as I begin to explore the philosophical, social, and political implications of my neo-Duchampian standpoint. In time I will boldly suggest that this aesthetic perspective might help fulfil the two projects of liberation I acknowledged earlier – the aesthetic revolution and the political revolution – which both took place in 1917. To make this case I will have to merge the domains of aesthetics and political economy in ways that I feel have the potential to transform and transcend both in almost unrecognisable ways. By doing so, I hope to advance the cause of freedom by upholding beauty.

¹ See Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1987) p. 74. *Fountain* was hidden behind a partition so it could not be viewed for the duration of the exhibition.

² See Unsigned review, 'His Art Too Crude for Independents' *The New York Herald* (14 April 1917). The board or committee concluded that *Fountain* was a very useful object but that its place was not in an art exhibition and that it was 'by no definition, a work of art.'

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963) p. 31.

⁴ Morris Weitz, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (1956) 15(1): pp. 27-35.

⁵ Walter Gallie, 'Essentially Contested Concepts' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1955) 56: pp. 167-198.

⁶ Weitz, 'Role of Theory', note 4, pp. 31-2

⁷ Arthur Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 31.

⁸ See, e.g., George Dickie, 'Defining Art' *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1969) 6: pp. 253-256.

⁹ Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld' *Journal of Philosophy* (1964) 61(19): pp. 571-584.

¹⁰ Danto, *Transfiguration*, note 7.

¹¹ As Danto writes: 'What would have provoked Duchamp to madness or murder, I should think, would be the sight of aesthetes mooning over the gleaming surfaces of the porcelain object he had manhandled into the exhibition space: "How like Kilimanjaro! How like the white radiance of Eternity! How Arctically sublime!" (Bitter laughter at the *Club des artistes*).' In Danto, *Transfiguration*, note 7, p. 94.

¹² Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Nature' in Carl Bode (ed.) *The Portable Emerson* (New York: Penguin, 1981) p. 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ This statement is found in Andre Breton and Paul Eluard's, *Dictionnaire Abrege du Surrealism*, published in 1938. The statement is signed off with the initials M.D. (presumably referring to Marcel Duchamp).

¹⁵ Marcel Duchamp to Don Bell, 'A Conversation with Marcel Duchamp' *Canadian Art* (1987) 4(4): p. 57.

¹⁶ Danto, 'The Artworld', note 9, p. 575.

¹⁷ Arthur Danto, 'The End of Art: A Philosophical Defence' *History and Theory* 37(4): p. 130.

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- ¹⁸ Arthur Danto, 'The End of Art' in Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) Ch. 5.
- ¹⁹ Presumably the same epiphany could have been provoked by *Fountain*, since on the issue of presenting an ordinary object of the world as art, Warhol offered no interesting development of Duchamp's readymades.
- ²⁰ See Danto, *Philosophical Disenfranchisement*, note 18.
- ²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy* and *The Case of Wagner* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 83 (emphasis removed).
- ²² Arthur Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) p. 101.
- ²³ Danto, 'The End of Art: A Philosophical Defence', note 17, p. 127.
- ²⁴ See Danto, 'The End of Art' note 18. See also, Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).
- ²⁵ To provide two notorious examples, in the 'Second Surrealist Manifesto', Andre Breton would write: 'The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd.' See Andre Breton, 'Second Surrealist Manifesto' in Andre Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, undated), p.125. Secondly, in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde would write: 'There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written, that is all.' See Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 3.
- ²⁶ I discuss Nietzsche's views on suffering in my forthcoming essays in this collection. See especially, 'Pessimism without Despair: Suffering, Desire, and the Affirmation of Life' and 'An Aesthetic Justification of Existence: The Redemptive Function of Art'. The essays will be posted here: <http://samuelalexander.info/s-m-p-l-c-t-y-ecological-civilisation-and-the-will-to-art/> (accessed 10 May 2023).
- ²⁷ See generally, Nikolas Kompridis (ed.) *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014). I discuss these issues in more detail in my essay, 'Making Art While the World Weeps: Political Reflections on Aesthetics'. See link in note 26.
- ²⁸ See Michel Foucault, 'An Aesthetics of Existence' in Lawrence Kritzman (ed.) *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 47-53.
- ²⁹ I discuss the ethics of self-fashioning in my forthcoming essay 'Giving Birth to Oneself: Ethics as an "Aesthetics of Existence"'. See link in note 26.
- ³⁰ William Morris, 'The Beauty of Life' in William Morris, *Hopes and Fears for Art: Five Lectures by William Morris*. Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1882/hopes/chapters/index.htm> (accessed 10 May 2023), para. 102.
- ³¹ Danto, *Transfiguration*, note 7, p. 102.
- ³² *Ibid*, p. 99.