



The Void

"Fountain", Marcel Duchamp, 1917 (2013 installation)

Modern art is a disaster area. Never in the field of human history has so much been used by so many to say so little.

Banksy, anonymous street artist

IN 1917, THE CELEBRATED ARTIST Marcel Duchamp entered a urinal into an exhibition organized by the Society of Independent Artists, a newly-formed association of avant-garde artists based in New York, to be held that spring at the city's prestigious Grand Central Palace.

Duchamp's entry, entitled *Fountain*, was adorned with the pseudonym 'R. Mutt', and many historians believe he was acting as a proxy for the eccentric German baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven.

The baroness was a noted Dadaist artist, and the urinal was presumably a tongue-in-cheek challenge to the art world to define the boundaries of the term 'work of art.'

However, unwilling to accept an off-the-shelf plumbing fixture as a legitimate work of art — simply on the basis of the artist declaring that it was one — the urinal was summarily rejected, despite the Society having agreed to accept all works entered.

Times change, and by the 1950s Duchamp had been persuaded to produce no less than 17 new versions of the work, which can now be found exhibited throughout many of the leading art galleries of the world. In the year 2000, 500 leading art experts deemed Duchamp's urinal to be, in fact, "the most influential work of art of the 20th century." (Nowadays, they are typically displayed in perspex cases, after a number of gallery patrons — most notably the musician Brian Eno — attempted to 'engage with' the art.)

Duchamp was hardly the first artist to thumb his nose at the art establishment, but he did start the ball rolling (or the water flowing).

In 1958, Yves Klein one-upped Duchamp, hosting an exhibition in Paris consisting entirely of an empty gallery. The exhibit, entitled *Le Void (The Void)* is now considered one of the earliest examples of ‘conceptual art’—a term which would come into wide use during the following decade.

Klein later dabbled in performance art—in one instance dragging nude female models covered in blue paint across a blank canvas, accompanied by a full orchestra—before himself departing to ‘Le Void’ in 1962.

In 1969, Robert Barry did away with the gallery altogether, in an exhibition consisting of a locked gallery with a notice posted at the entrance curtly informing visitors: *For the exhibition the gallery will be closed.*

Piero Manzoni would have found such pretentious antics in poor taste. In 1961—as if in reply to legendary art critic Brian Sewell, who would later sum up such efforts as ‘shiny shit’—Manzoni gifted the art world with 90 cans filled with his own excrement.

Despite *Le Void* winning the prestigious Turner Prize in 2001, one of Klein’s later works—a 10-foot-long panel created with a blowtorch, water and two presumably naked models—selling for \$36 million in 2012, and several of Manzoni’s cans of crap selling for *more than their weight in gold* (unfortunately, the artist wasn’t around to collect, having drunk himself to death in the interim), it’s safe to say that these and other early conceptual artists probably had no idea where their new art genre was headed.

The same can not be said for Jeff Koons, whose 3-foot tall chrome *Rabbit* (1986)—one of four identical works in existence—sold for a cool \$91 million in 2019. The *Rabbit* followed the philozoic Koons’s *Balloon Dog-Orange*, a stainless-steel sculpture that looks remarkably like—yes—an *orange balloon dog*, which went for a barking-mad \$58 million in 2013.

Or how about *The Physical Impossibility of Death In The Mind Of Someone Living*, a very large, very dead tiger shark replica by the prolific artist Damien Hirst, which sold for what might be justifiably called an arm and a leg (about \$4 million) in 2014. (Despite being preserved in formaldehyde, the original shark had rotted sufficiently to require replacement eight years prior.)

Better yet: Tracey Emin’s notorious *My Bed* (1998), consisting of an unmade bed with a jumble of condoms, cigarette butts, and random bedroom detritus scattered on and around it. (The frequently overheard comment—“My teenage daughter could have made that!”—never seemed more fitting.)

My Bed sold for \$4 million in 2014, despite a later investigation revealing that the seminal artist never actually slept, wept, or made love in it, claims held as justification for its obscene valuation. (The embarrassing disclosure brings to mind Christina Rosa’s 2013 minimalist doodling in pencil, spray paint and oil—succinctly titled *Oh Fuck*.)

But no better proof exists that the art world has gone completely bananas than Maurizio Cattelan’s aptly named *Comedian*, exhibited in 2019 at an upscale Miami Beach gallery. Consisting entirely of an unripe banana duct-taped to the gallery wall, it sold for \$120,000—a sum equivalent to about six tractor trailers worth of bananas. (Tragically, the soon-ripe banana was later peeled and eaten in front of horrified gallery patrons by an aspiring performance artist.)

Coincidentally, the departed banana’s sale price was exactly 1,000 times what noted still life artist Vincent Van Gogh had fruitlessly hoped his iconic painting *Sunflowers* would fetch in 1888. The now-priceless painting was completed a few months before the penniless artist committed suicide.

Maybe he should have stuck with fruits and vegetables.