Work Avoidance: The Everyday Life of Marcel Duchamp's Readymades
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Deep down I'm enormously lazy. I like living, breathing better than working.
—Marcel Duchamp

A hat rack and coatrack to hang things on, a comb to straighten one's hair, a cover to protect a typewriter from dust, a urinal for peeing in, a rack to dry bottles, a shovel to remove snow. Almost all of Duchamp's readymades could have been found in an average home or store; they are mundane objects of everyday life. Sharing the attribute quotidian, the readymades are also bound together by the processes of maintenance. They are objects for cleaning, hanging, storing, drying, preening, and peeing: objects whose purpose is to aid in self-presentation, objects that allow homes and offices to function. They are the unsung aids that allow us to do the work of maintaining house and body, so that we are better prepared to do our other work, like making art, for instance. But this was not the situation of these objects in Duchamp's studio: the hat rack was suspended from the ceiling; the coatrack was nailed to the floor; the typewriter cover protected nothing but air; and the urinal stood alone, invented, forever unused (fig. 1).

This stalled image of the readymades does not come from museums or history books. It is found in photographs of the readymades taken in Duchamp's New York studio. There we see the readymades installed, not on pedestals or in vitrines, but positioned (strategically, in a manner that evokes furniture and objets d'art) around an armchair—a coatrack nailed to the floor in front of a bicycle wheel atop a kitchen stool. There is a photograph in the background of which we spy the urinal suspended from a doorjamb; in the foreground a shovel dangles from the ceiling. More photographs: a film-noirish one of the shadows cast by an off-kilter hat rack; a grainy image of the studio turned into a maze by Duchamp's Sculpture for Traveling (1918), a bathing cap cut into strips and pinned across the room at various intervals. That Duchamp thought enough of these photographs to include them in his retrospective Boîte-en-valise (1941), and then to color them, their sepia tones rendering them "historical," is not surprising. During the initial "invention" of the readymades his studio was their major site of reception.

Arguably, the readymade has done more to reorganize aesthetic categories than any other twentieth-century art practice. One of its many ramifications was a disavowal of an ontological definition of art. These machine-made objects, first chosen by Duchamp and subsequently installed in museums and galleries (or not, as was the case of Fountain at the 1917 Independents Exhibition), made it clear that the idea of "Art" was produced contextually. Likewise, it has been argued that the inclusion of language, combined with Duchamp's self-conscious eschewing of art's (presumed) unmediated visuality, foregrounded the way that meaning itself is actively produced by viewing and speaking subjects, interpelled as they are by a variety of institutional positions. The readymade was a linchpin in formulating what are now familiar discussions of the contingency, not only of art, but of meaning itself. It was a lever that pried

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Helen Molesworth

**Work Avoidance:**

The Everyday Life of Marcel Duchamp's Readymades

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This essay benefited from two thoughtful readers, Janet Kraynak and Margaret Sundell, and invaluable discussions with Frazer Ward.

1. I am borrowing the term maintenance from the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles. In the seventies Ukeles did a series of performances entitled Maintenance Art, in which she cleaned spaces ranging from her home to museums to public sidewalks. These performances posited an equivalence between "public" and "private" institutions of art—galleries, museums, and private homes—by suggesting that domestic labor is not exclusively "private." Instead, her work argues that maintenance work is a continuum that connects usually unseen/unpaid domestic labor to the same maintenance work that occurs in "public" institutions. I use maintenance work as opposed to domestic work in this argument to underscore and value this form of labor as such, as opposed to relegating it to the usually denigrated and putatively private "housework." For more on Ukeles's Maintenance Art, see "Artist Project: Mierle Laderman Ukeles Maintenance Art Activity (1973) with Responses from Mlicon: Kwon and Helen Molesworth," Documents 10 (Fall 1997): 5–22.

2. The readymades were not widely exhibited until after World War II. The most famous one, Fountain, was fundamentally suppressed (hidden behind a partition) during its debut at the 1917 Independents Exhibition. The exhibition history of other readymades is sketchy at best; see Calvin Tomkins, Duchamp: A Biography (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), and William Camfield, Marcel Duchamp, Fountain (Houston: Houston Fine Art Press, 1989).
open art (and art history) to debates about meaning and context, particularly the question of how art’s meaning is derived in large measure from its institutional and linguistic contexts. However, such arguments have traditionally ignored the content of the readymades. Similarly, these debates have limited the field of art’s institutions to the gallery and the museum, leaving out other sites that help to construct art’s meaning. Given the readymades’ registration of the consequence of context, the photographs from Duchamp’s studio, suggesting as they do an expanded idea of institutions, have remained sorely underexamined.

These studio photographs do not show the (glorified) artist at work. Instead, we see ambiguous rooms filled with curious objects. Ambiguous because these rooms are not only Duchamp’s studio, they are also his home. If Duchamp’s work can be used to understand that art’s meaning is bound to its institutions, then these photographs broaden the understanding of what those institutions are. If we understand Boîte-en-valise to be a self-staged museological retrospective, then his inclusion of these photographs of the readymades installed in his home points to the home (be it the artist’s or the collector’s) as an institution of art on a par with the museum or gallery.5

These photographs provide us with a context to view the readymades, but one characterized by blurred boundaries. The home, traditionally conceived of as a space of rest, is here crossed with the studio, historically understood as the primary site of artistic work. Adding to this confusion is yet another smudged edge, because work (making art in the studio) and leisure (not working, which takes place at home, or art making as a form of leisure) are brought into extreme proximity. The lack of a hard-and-fast divide between work and leisure is emphasized by these images of functional maintenance objects—objects designed to aid in the cleaning and tidying up of places and people—rendered deliberately dysfunctional. Duchamp’s ambivalence toward work did not only relate to artistic production, but he resisted the labor of housework as well.

In these muddy waters public and private have swirled together, as the ideas of home and studio, work and leisure penetrate one another.6 The interpenetration of these elements of human experience constitutes the everyday as theorized by the sociologist Henri Lefebvre. In The Critique of Everyday Life he argues that work, leisure, and private life form an inseparable triumvirate, within which resides the everyday. From this seemingly impenetrable totality, and current conditions of late capital make the reification of everyday life even more pronounced, Lefebvre desires to extract what is “living” from the condition of “alienation.”7 The readymades, particularly as photographed in Duchamp’s studio, make manifest Lefebvre’s three attributes of the everyday: “work” is registered by the studio; “leisure” is doubly present in the ideological functions or role of art; home, and “private life,” is suggested in that the studio is a domestic space as well as a work space. Likewise, in Duchamp’s work there is a latent acknowledgment that domestic space, historically con-

3. For the relation of the readymade to structural linguistics, see Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index,” in The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 196–209. Benjamin Buchloh has done the most sustained work on the institutional implications of the readymade. In discussing what he refers to as the Duchamp legacy he writes: “Beginning with the readymade, the work of art had become the ultimate subject of a legal definition and the result of institutional validation”; see Buchloh, “Readymade, Object Trouvé, Iddé Reçue,” in Dissent: The Issue of Modern Art in Boston (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1985), 113. (In this article Buchloh also underscores the linguistic understanding of the readymade.) Buchloh contends that the most radical element of the readymade is that “the definition of the aesthetic becomes on the one hand a matter of linguistic convention and on the other the function of both a legal contract and institutional discourse (a discourse of power rather than taste).” Hence, he understands Conceptual art and institutional critique to be the fullest articulations of the readymade’s critical potential. Its ability to critique institutions and structures of power; see Buchloh, “Conceptual Art, 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” October, no. 55 (Winter 1990): 117–18. Yet his account neglects the content of the readymades and limits the field of the institutions of art to the “public” institutions of the museum and gallery, missing Duchamp’s indication of domestic space and maintenance labor as being.

inextricable from the matrix of art's institutions. There are artists who may "inherit" these aspects of the readymade legacy such as Ukeles, Mary Kelly, Chantal Akerman, Robert Gober, David Hammons, Louise Lawler, and Sowon Kwon. To this end, Buchloh's argument falls prey to the all-too-common conception, described by Carol Pateman, that "The public sphere is always assumed to throw light onto the private sphere, rather than vice versa. On the contrary, an understanding of modern patriarchy requires that the employment contract is illuminated by the structure of domestic relations," see Pateman, The Sexual Contract (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988). 

4. Most notably the home and the department store. Museums and department stores had a lively interaction during the period of Duchamp's sojourn in New York; see William Leach, Land of Desire (New York: Pantheon, 1993). This essay is part of a larger project concerning the Duchampian readymade, which includes a discussion of the readymades as situated in the ambiguous realm between museums, department stores, and living rooms, the role of mass consumption in procuring the readymades, and maintenance labor, which includes the work of shopping.

5. On the museological implications of BoFte-en-valise, see Benjamin Buchloh, "The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broodthaers," in Museums by Artists, ed. A. A. Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983). There are other explicitly "domestic" moments in Duchamp's oeuvre. He painted Tu/m to fit a specific site in the home of his patron and friend Katherine Dreier; likewise he made several forays into interior decorating (including painting an elevator with a leaf pattern to match the room) and arranging art in her home; see Tonniris.

6. This blending of public and private is furthered by the way the photographs of these mongrelized (private/public) rooms function as a form of publicity (in the BoFte-en-valise, in history books, etc.).


9. I am not arguing that Duchamp was directly "influenced" by the advent of scientific management. I would hesitate to draw such an ambiguous conclusion based on a seemingly transparent model of (artistic) cause and effect. Rather, I propose that Duchamp worked within what de Duve has called a "field of resonances." In "Resonances," 42, de Duve writes: "There are other means than influence for the artist to beceived of as a space of rest or leisure (for men), is always already a site of work, specifically the work of maintenance.

In his critique of the everyday, Lefebvre sought not simply "entertainment" or "relaxation" but the articulation of different forms of knowledge, knowledge that could aid in the potential and/or intermittent process of "de-alienation." It is not in leisure as such where a critique of capitalism is to be found. Rather, a critique may emerge in those moments when the relations between elements of the everyday are made evident or challenged. Duchamp's presentation and arrangement of the readymades exhibit a desire to foil the functionality of these objects, whose usefulness resides in their ability to aid domestic and maintenance labor. Yet in foiling work, the readymades do not offer leisure as work's simple antithesis (nor do they offer art as pure leisure). Instead, their placement in the home/studio tangles the categories of both work and leisure. This presentation of nonwork and leisure has a social and historical context larger than Duchamp's studio, for Duchamp's refusal of work (both maintenance and traditional means of artistic labor) happened alongside one of the most profound shifts in twentieth-century conceptions of work: Taylorism. Just as the photographs of the readymades in Duchamp's studio have not been adequately theorized, the sociohistorical conditions within which the readymades came into being in New York are absent from much Duchamp literature. As Duchamp's work of this period appears concerned with the terms of work, an examination of the contemporaneous shift in the practice, conception, and representation of work seems necessary.

The publication of Frederick Winslow Taylor's Principles of Scientific Management (1911) profoundly changed industrialized labor. Taylorism, as "scientific management" came to be called, consists of breaking down a work operation into its component parts through a rigorous system of monitoring the time each physical movement in the work process takes. It was designed to eliminate wasted motion by manual workers, hence wasted time, to increase their output. This required the development (and the subsequent consolidation) of the managerial class, workers whose job is to monitor, represent, and then alter work procedures, without themselves participating in those tasks. This shift institutionalized the inequitable relations between different types of labor (manual and "mental") and their concomitant "types" of workers. Taylorism was responsible for the assembly line (perfected by Henry Ford), which valorized "streamlined" labor and above all efficiency. The ultimate goal of Taylorism's quest for efficient labor was increased profits, as opposed to a shorter or more comfortable workweek for workers.

A lesser-known example of Taylorism's appeal is the vigor with which the Domestic Economy movement adopted it. Although the scientific management expert Christine Frederick is not well known today outside of women's studies, her impact on kitchens across the United States rivals her Taylorist counterpart in industrial production, Henry Ford. In 1913 she published The New Housekeeping after it had been serialized and widely read in the popular women's magazine, Ladies' Home Journal, of which she was an editor. The book was the first in a genre of helpful hint manuals that applied the principles of scientific management to the North American household. In the opening pages, Frederick is sitting and mending while she overhears her husband and
permeated by a context and draw from it some consequences that will show up in the art work itself." This argument presents some of the historical conditions (and hence possibilities) that inform the period when Duchamp was working in New York during the early decades of the twentieth century.

10. Although Taylor presented scientific management as a benign restructuring of the workforce, one that would ease the labor of both manual and managerial workers, he referred to manual laborers as omen and remarked on their brute animal force. The typecasting of labor was also evident in domestic space as servants (usually African American or immigrant Irish women) were hired by white middle- and upper-middle-class families to do specific domestic jobs.


12. See Christine Frederick, The New Housekeeping: Efficiency Studies in Home Management (New York: Doubleday, 1913). Streamlining the home was highly publicized during the Columbian Exposition of 1893, through the introduction of the new academic disciplines of domestic science and "home economics." See Martha Banta's Taylored Lives: Narrative Productions in the Age of Taylor, Veblen, and Ford (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), after the 1911 publication of Taylor's Principles of Scientific Management there was a renewed and strengthened interest in Taylorizing the home. Frederick was primarily responsible for and publicly associated with this phenomenon.

13. Frederick, 7.


15. See Siegfried Giedion, Mechanization Takes Command (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), and Wtold Rybczynski, Home: A Short History of an Idea (New York: Penguin Books, 1986). Domestic science has a long tradition in the United States, starting with Catharine Beecher's Treatise on Domestic Economy (1841). Beecher was the first to propose the notion of the ideal kitchen, thereby situating women's housework within a particularly moral framework—the good home produces the good citizen. This essay focuses solely on the second wave of domestic science and its relationship to scientific management. However, it is important to note that both waves are related, particularly in their ambivalent relationship to the radical feminist movements that coincided with them.

16. Frederick, 41.

17. Ibid., 234.


a colleague discussing "efficiency" or "scientific management."" Frederick's first response is skeptical: "In a factory the workers do just one thing ... and it is easy to standardize one set of operations. But in a home there are dozens, yes, hundreds, of tasks requiring totally different knowledge and movements." Her resistance is soon worn down by scientific management's promise to reduce waste. She exclaims: "I won't have you men doing all the great and noble things! I'm going to find out how these experts conduct investigations, and all about it, and then apply it to my factory, my business, my home.""

This equation of domestic to factory space is extraordinary, especially as there is no profit to be made in housework. (And it is homologous to Duchamp's studio-as-home, home-as-studio environment.) Despite the apparent contradictions between factory and domestic work, the "factorization" of the kitchen went on unhindered, accompanied and aided by the mechanization and electrification of domestic space.

Frederick, like all good scientific managers, was highly averse to wasting time and effort. She streamlined women's work, further developing the continuous work surface, and reorganized the kitchen into "properly" arranged workstations. Although she extolled the virtues of a mechanized kitchen, she was quick to point out that she believed "strongly that women's liberation from drudgery lies not so much in tools as in her own improved methods of work." The real issue for Frederick was the standardization of housework. It should become modern, routinized, and efficient. "The ideal home life of today," she writes in a manifesto-style language not dissimilar to that of her avant-garde artist contemporaries, is "unhampered by traditions of the past.""

This relation to domestic space is curious. Ideologically speaking, the modern industrial era has figured domestic space as a haven from public spaces, a place of rest and respite (for men) from the spaces of work. Actually, the home has always been a space of work and production. One of the crises signified by the adoption of scientific management by domestic science was the changing status of domestic space as a site of production. At the turn of the century, the production of such daily goods as bread, soap, and clothes was removed from the home because these staples were now mass-produced. Scientific management's application in the home insisted that domestic space was a site of work and industry, even though the home had ceased to be a site of material production. Domestic economists discussed work that had become, as a result of the displacement of material production, increasingly hard to represent: the "women's work that is never done"—cleaning, cooking, and child-rearing. They emphasized the perpetual labor of maintenance, as opposed to forms of work that result in a discrete object.

In Bodies and Machines, the literary critic Mark Seltzer argues that Taylorism not only altered the work process (by making it more "efficient") but also invented new forms of work. He contends that "the real innovation of Taylorization becomes visible in the incorporation of the representation of the work process into the work process itself—or, better, the incorporation of the representation of the work process as the work process itself." The representation of labor—graphs, flow charts—became a form of labor in and of itself, with manual laborers represented by their newly established managers. We
can see clearly the irony of a Taylorized household, as women were asked to represent, manage, and alter their own manual labor.

Given the virtual invisibility of housework and maintenance labor, the difficulty, that is, of acknowledging maintenance activities as work, representing them proved to be a rather peculiar task. (After all, a clean house is clean inasmuch as the labor of cleaning is no longer present; the typed office memo is not thought of as the “real” work, its content is.) The domestic economist Lillian Gilbreth described her elaborate system for generating representations of the domestic laborer’s movement (fig. 2):

To make this, the observer follows the worker around with a ball of twine, measuring the distance traveled. She then makes a plan of the work place, placing pins at whatever points the worker has turned. She then measures the lengths of twine to scale and winds it around the pins to mark the path traveled.

A child may follow Mother around as she clears the table and gets the dishes ready for stacking, unwinding the ball of string as she goes. A sketch of the dining room and pantry is then made and her path traced by the string, pins being inserted, as suggested, at the turns. 21

Gilbreth demonstrates that the representation of work has in fact become part of the work process, as making this diagram is an additional labor to the labor of washing the dishes. This new labor occupies the same space—the kitchen, the pantry—as it represents such acts as a woman carrying dirty dishes. (There are no helpful hints, however, for how to leave the kitchen to make this diagram.) Yet one cannot help but see this image of a little boy making a cat’s cradle of his mother’s work, all in the name of rationalized work, as slightly amusing, inadvertently playful, as it delayed or postponed the work it was meant to represent and make more efficient.

It is precisely this delay or postponement of labor that runs throughout Duchamp’s work, adept as he is at isolating moments when work is represented and foiled simultaneously. Think of the difference between Gilbreth’s string-filled room designed to help systematize and streamline kitchen work and Duchamp’s Sculpture for Traveling (fig. 3). The studio—the place where the work of making art is supposed to happen—is transformed into a maze or labyrinth obstructing or delaying the artist’s ability to make art. Similarly, in 1942 Duchamp installed a mile of string, in the exhibition “First Papers of Surrealism” (fig. 4). At the opening visitors found “the premises already inhabited by a dozen boys and girls in athletic gear, kicking and passing balls and skipping rope and chasing each other around through the barriers of string. If anyone objected, the children had been instructed to say that ‘Mr. Duchamp told us we could play here.’” 22

making or looking at art, but he did so by disallowing such labors and/or leisure to take place.

We must remember that motion-study diagrams were designed not only to represent maintenance labor; their ultimate goal, in the name of efficiency, was to eliminate unnecessary steps. Taylorism’s desire to eliminate wasted time meant that it often entered the home as a series of “step-saving” devices. Advertisements and helpful hint manuals told women that they were going to experience an exponential rise in “free time” for “leisure” activities as a result of these “revolutionary” domestic changes and “ground-breaking” mechanical innovations. But the image of the efficient, streamlined kitchen with its Taylorized worker/manager performing well-appointed, rationalized duties in a newly systematized manner and space could not be farther from the photographs of the readymades in Duchamp’s studio. In Duchamp’s home/studio the readymades were arranged in a way that foiled work, creating unnecessary steps. In other words, the readymades were nothing if not willfully inefficient.

Enter Tembour (1917) (fig. 5). Duchamp recalled Tembour as a “real coat hanger that I wanted someone to put on the wall and hang my things on but I never did come to that—so it was on the floor and I would kick it every minute, every time I went out—I got crazy about it and I said the Hell with it, if it wants to stay there and bore me, I’ll nail it down.” Tembour presents not a step saved but a step wasted, a distraction. Or, it was a perverse “step saver,” for when one trips one “misses” a step, saving it in another regard. Tembour is a visual pun, but more important, it is a physical set-up for slapstick humor. Seeing it there (like a banana peel), Duchamp and the guests in his studio might have watched in humorous anticipation, waiting for someone to fall. There are other readymades like this: a hat rack suspended from the ceiling . . . go ahead, hang your hat on it; you could pluck one of those marble sugar cubes from Why Not Sneeze Rose Selavy? (1921) for your coffee (like a plastic fly in a bowl of soup); and if a man pees in the Fountain his urine will drip on him.

We have already seen the confusion between the spaces of work and leisure in the photographs of the readymades in Duchamp’s studio. We can also see that the arrangements of the readymades interject an element of play among a set of otherwise fairly banal functional objects. Additionally, the objects blur the boundaries between home and work (typewriter cover, comb, shovel) in that their functions are all bound to the labor of maintenance, a stratum of labor structural both to the space of the home and more traditionally conceived work spaces. Not only has Duchamp blurred the traditional boundaries of work and leisure in the studio, but the readymades are functional objects rendered playful through their humorous appeal to slapstick.

While Marxism offers us the most sophisticated theoretical account of labor, it has also concerned itself with work’s dialectical other, play or leisure. For many Marxist thinkers play has an idealistic, almost utopian dimension, in that it is posited to exist outside the rules and regulations of everyday life. Herbert Marcuse has focused more of his philosophical energies on play than his Marxist contemporaries. He writes that play is a dimension of freedom, a “self-distraction, relaxing oneself, forgetting oneself and recuperating oneself.” If for Marcuse play is a dimension of freedom, then he enables play to serve as a critique of society, because of its position outside the conventions.
of the everyday. One hesitates to instrumentalize play in this way, turning it into a philosophical lever in the service of some utopian vision, but in Duchamp’s slapstick-infused ready-mades, the idea and the actuality of play offer possibilities for examining the tangled knot of work and leisure in everyday life.

In 1913 Duchamp jotted a note to himself: “Can one make works which are not works of ‘art?’ Can one make something that has no function, that performs no work, that is not beholden to a purpose, even that of art? Something not beholden to leisure either? In such a formulation, art and play exist in an analogously tenuous realm of (im)possibility. Marcuse states it thus: “On the whole play is necessarily related to an Other which is its source and goal, and this Other is already preconceived as labor.”28 But, if play can only be seen in relation to work, and it is seen as the lesser component of this dialectic in that play is enabled or made possible by work (“its source and goal”), then play, in its officially sanctioned role as anew work, becomes a form of work. (One need only think of the regimentation of “the weekend” or each summer’s obligatory Disney movie.) Lefebvre argues that one ramification of this interdependence between labor and play is that “there can be alienation in leisure just as in work.”29 Duchamp attempted to use play, in the form of slapstick, not as a reprieve from work but as a means to stop work. This is where play’s potential utopian or critical dimension (a utopia free from labor and a critique of capitalism’s dependence on alienated labor for profit) can be seen most fully.

Another playful intervention into everyday life is Door, 11 Rue Larrey (1927) (fig. 6). In Duchamp’s Paris apartment he built a door “which served two doorways (between the studio and the bedroom, and the studio and the bathroom). The door could be both open and closed at the same time, thus providing Duchamp with a household paradox as well as a practical space-saving device.”30 Herein lies the rub. Imagine any one of Duchamp’s ready-mades in the domestic utopia of Christine Frederick or Lillian Gilbreth, objects lying in wait to disrupt business as usual. They are an anathema to the logic of Taylorized, rationalized, and rigidly systematized domestic/work space. The door is described as a “practical space-saving device,” yet it belongs more to a set for a bedroom farce than to the streamlined, efficient kitchen spaces envisioned by Gilbreth and Frederick. Duchamp’s rooms—whether filled with string, prank doors, or ready-mades provoking pratfalls—all confound the logic of work and efficiency. Instead, when Duchamp altered the purposes of both rooms and objects, to provoke play rather than work, laughter becomes their new “function.”

In his quirky account of comedy, Laughter, the philosopher Henri Bergson explains the comic effect of slapstick: “Through a lack of elasticity, through absentmindedness and a kind of physical obstinacy, as a result, in fact, of rigidity or of momentum, the muscles continue to perform the same movement when the circumstances call for something else.”31 Laughter, he reckons, comes from

28. Ibid. Marcuse argues against the anthropological notion that play comes first as a human social activity followed by work in cultures of accumulation. Instead, he argues that labor “is the starting point, foundation, and principle of play insofar as play is precisely a breakng off from labor and a recuperation for labor.”
30. D’Harmenourt and McShine, 300. By troubling the boundaries of public and private within the home, Door 11 rue Larrey, disallows the assignment of private/domestic in a manner similar to the photographs of the studio.
"something mechanical encrusted on the living."32 Duchamp’s readymades (re)articulate the working body as humorous. Bodies that continue old motions when new ones are called for and bodies that have become machinic, routinized, or Taylorized are transformed in Duchamp’s studio by his arrangement of the readymades. Laughter is both provoked by the involuntary (tripping) and is itself involuntary, as laughter occurs as an involuntary response to a person or thing not working (properly). Its involuntary nature, the way in which laughter places us outside ourselves, recalls Marcuse’s definition of play as that which distracts us from ourselves.33 Play and laughter do not require us to “be” ourselves but offer a momentary release from identities so often bound up in our daily work and labor.

The readymades are thus an anti-Taylorist gesture. They resist the rationalization of domestic and work spaces, first by refusing the distinction between them and second by offering disruption and laughter, physical expenditure in the name of humor, rather than work. Their antifunctionality is not solely about their stymied use and exchange value as commodities but has a more literal component. They are antifunctional as in antiwork: they resist their intended, mandated, standardized use. Similarly the readymades resist the working subject, offering instead the involuntary, distracted subject of play. To paraphrase Marcuse, as this subject, one has the potential to be self-distracted, relaxed, and, perhaps most important, forgetful of oneself. Through slapstick, the readymades focus on and call into question “normal” maintenance operations—keeping the house tidy by hanging things up and putting them away, in their “proper” place (the bottle rack, the coatrack, the hat rack). They disrupt, even refuse, rationalized or habitual movement through space. They help, in other words, to bring the relations of the everyday into focus for us and suggest that experiences of humor may be constitutive of the knowledge of the everyday. By offering a space and time for not working, the readymades offer a space for being “outside oneself.”

The use of slapstick to call forth humor with this kind of effect saturated early cinema; Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin readily come to mind. In Keaton’s One Week (1920), he builds a prefabricated home that refuses to stand erect and is finally run over by a train. Slapstick renders Keaton’s labor, supposedly made easier by the readymade aspect of the house, futile and overwhelmingly inefficient. Chaplin’s epic Modern Times (1936) used slapstick to expose the effects of rationalized work on the body. In the opening scenes, Chaplin leaves work, his jerking body, continuing his assembly-line task, literally screwing everything in sight (the foreman’s nose, the buttons on women’s dresses). Yet lest we think that slapstick cinema is merely a diversion, Lefebvre argues of Chaplin: “The secret of his comic powers lies not in his body, but in the relation of this body to something else: a social relation with the material world and the social world.”34 Likewise, the readymades are not funny in and of themselves, but encounters (here imagined) with them are, by virtue of their ability to transform everyday movements into slapstick. Their humor comes from what such encounters (real or not) are able to make evident about the material and social relations between work and leisure.

If Chaplin used slapstick to represent the toll of rationalized work on the body, then Duchamp used slapstick in a prohibitive manner. The readymades
stop you from moving, from working. If we remember Seltzer’s formulation that the innovation of Taylorism is the representation of work as work, then Duchamp is a perverse Taylorist—armed with slapstick provocations instead of stopwatches and diagrams. The ready-mades, too, represent maintenance labor, albeit as stalled, humorous, and impossible. But the futility of maintenance labor is perhaps precisely what should be acknowledged: a woman’s work is never done.

Lefebvre observes that “there is a certain obscurity in the very concept of everyday life.” He asks, “Where is it to be found? In work or in leisure? In family life and in moments ‘lived’ outside of culture?” He suggests that family life has become separate from productive life and that leisure has become as fragmented as labor. Ultimately, he concludes that the three constitutive elements of the everyday—work, private life, and leisure—have become discrete, alienated from one another. Yet Duchamp attempts, through humor and slapstick, to hold these three elements together. The ready-mades show that these categories are not discrete in experience but rather in ideology, for Duchamp’s practice presents domestic or private life as neither outside nor separate from the category of work. He uses leisure, in the form of slapstick and play, to expose domestic space as filled with work (be it maintenance work or art work) and in turn transforms that work into leisure or play. In the end, the ready-mades propose a space filled with neither work nor leisure; instead, they offer a kind of laziness. Characteristic of the ready-mades’ complex relation to both work and leisure, laziness operates as a third term, triangulating work and leisure, offering a criticism of both.

Duchamp’s laziness was the subject of many of his contemporaries’ responses to visiting his studio. Robert Lebel described Duchamp’s studio as “a large room with a bathtub in the center which Duchamp used for his frequent ablutions, and a rope an arm’s length away which allowed him to open the door without getting up.” Georgia O’Keeffe, reminiscing about meeting Duchamp in his New York studio, recalled one of his domestic work stoppages: “it seems there was a lot of something else in the middle of the room and the dust everywhere was so thick that it was hard to believe. I was so upset over the dusty place that the next day I wanted to go over and clean it up.” This refusal to clean was memorialized in Dust Breeding (1920), a section of the Large Glass photographed by Man Ray after it had accumulated several months’ worth of dust. But nowhere is Duchamp’s laziness more evident than in the ready-mades, where he produced art with the least effort possible—buying it already made. For Taylor, Duchamp’s dabblings with play and laziness—his experiments with not working—had a name: Duchamp was soldiering.

Taylor described soldiering as “under working, that is, deliberately working slowly so as to avoid doing a full day’s work.” For Taylor soldiering had two causes: first, the “natural instinct and tendency of men to take it easy”; and second (considered to be more dangerous), “intricate second thought and reasoning caused by their relations with other men.” Taylor called this “systematic soldiering.” Workers have two modes of foiling the factory: laziness exhibited in the form of individual soldiering and organized resistance in the form of strikes. Taylorism proposed to eliminate both. Striking and soldiering are extremely different critiques of work, one organized, systematic, and social; the other a private rebellion (refusing to dust). But in maintenance work in the
home there can be no strike. Duchamp’s readymades operate more closely to the second form of soldiering; they are not a strike per se, so much as they are a work slowdown. They temporarily stop or stall activities such as cleaning and tidying by turning housework into slapstick. Likewise, the studio as a place where art is made is suffused with a kind of laziness.

Laziness is mostly figured as a parasitical form of work avoidance. It runs the risk of being aristocratic (not working because others work for you) or primitivist (native peoples as unfettered by the work ethic). There are two theoretical accounts of laziness as a philosophical position, and both maintain a similar utopian dimension to the previous discussion of the function or structure of play. Paul Lafargue and Roland Barthes argue that laziness is an attempt to completely escape the logic of work. They do not offer leisure as the antidote to work, but laziness as the refusal of work.

Lafargue, a Cuban-born ex-medical student, wrote the radical pamphlet “The Right to Be Lazy” in 1886—a tirade against work that infuriated his father-in-law, Karl Marx. Originally printed in French, the tract was translated into English and published in the United States in 1917 (the same year Duchamp purchased the urinal that would become Fountain). Lafargue’s polemic against “progress” belongs to the primitivist side of laziness, entitling unindustrialized native peoples who do not toil for a capitalist exploiter. Lafargue writes: “It [the proletariat] must return to its natural instincts, it must proclaim the Rights of Laziness, a thousand times more noble and sacred than the anemic Rights of Man concocted by the metaphysical lawyers of the bourgeois revolution.”

Lafargue sees the advent of industrial production as enabling time for leisure, as opposed to the increased profits envisioned by Taylorism. But he never posits that “free time” should be used for “productive” or “creative” forms of leisure. Instead, he insists on feasting and sleeping as the “Rights of Man.” The most indelible image from the tract remains a quotation that perversely describes Duchamp’s infamous decision to give up art for chess, his relinquishing of a working life as an artist for the life of a game player: “Jehovah, the bearded and angry god, gave his worshippers the supreme example of ideal laziness; after six days of work, he rests for eternity.”

In fact, Duchamp never stopped making art. He designed magazine covers, made the Bôîte-en-valse, and, ultimately, worked for twenty years on Étant Donnés (1946–66). The problem exposed by the “untruth” of the abandonment is how terribly difficult it is not to work. Roland Barthes addresses this point in a short interview entitled “Dare to Be Lazy.” Barthes describes two forms of laziness, one born of the struggle to get something done, laziness as procrastination from work, or “marinating” in order to work. Barthes says: “Obviously, this shameful laziness doesn’t take the form of ‘not doing anything,’ which is the glorious and philosophical form of laziness.” The philosophical form is precisely what is at issue. Barthes asks, “Have you ever noticed that everyone always talks about the right to leisure activities but never about a right to idleness? I even wonder if there is such a thing as doing nothing in the modern Western world.” Yet Barthes realized the potential nihilism in the concept of doing nothing. For laziness, he notes, is a problem for the subject: “In a situation of idleness the subject is almost dispossessed of his consistency as a subject. He is decentered, unable even to say ‘I.’ That would be
true idleness. To be able, at certain moments, to no longer have to say “I.”

Duchamp came closer to doing nothing than most artists. But he was lucky. Generously supported by his patrons Louise and Walter Arensberg, who paid his rent and living expenses in exchange for artworks, and hired by the wealthy Stettheimer sisters as their French tutor—although since they had been raised in France, all three sisters were completely fluent and obviously needed no tutor—Duchamp largely managed to avoid working. He lived an aristocratic leisurely life, his idleness made possible through the wealth of others and a frugal life-style. Yet while Duchamp may have courted laziness, and let laziness infuse his art practice, ultimately the complete cessation of artistic activity was impossible. Impossible, as Barthes suggests, for it would mean an abandonment of the first person pronoun.

Duchamp’s readymades are an attempt to think outside the logic of work, a logic in which “the goal of labor is the full reality of human existence.” Not to work—to be lazy—is then to deny the full reality of human existence, to deny the category of “I,” at least the form familiar to bourgeois capitalism. Duchamp experimented with this idea by evoking the involuntary laughter within which the “I” is no longer central, and by transforming his studio, a place of work, into a site of play. The studio became a place where he could be, in Bergson’s term, “absentminded” or, in Marcuse’s, “self-distracted.” This questioning of the “I” runs throughout Duchamp’s work. After all, this is an oeuvre marked by a proliferation of aliases; a deliberate use of linguistic shifters; an emphasis on language and the self as both shared and constructed, and a dismantling of perspectival vision (with its creation of a fixed subject), all concerns that point toward a consistent questioning of the category of “I.” Duchamp toyed and played with the possibility of nonwork—the right to laziness—the ability not to say “I.” That this position is impossible (or worse yet, romantic) should not deter serious thinking about laziness. Duchamp, by saying that he abandoned art making without really doing so, was perhaps pretending to be lazy, acting at not working. Lefebvre suggests that when “acting explores what is possible” it adds “something real: the knowledge of a situation, an action, a result to be obtained.” If what is to be obtained through such play is knowledge (and disalienation), then what knowledge is potentially garnered through laziness? Is it the suggestion that there can be no alienation in laziness, for there is no “I” to separate from or be identical with? Or is laziness a conduit to bring us back to the most fundamental of Marx’s demands, a demand designed to alter the terms of alienated life under capital: “The reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite.”

Duchamp’s challenge to the primacy of the category of work largely took the form of a protest against maintenance labor, pointing toward the changing historical conditions of housewifery, domestic space, and work in the early twentieth century. Duchamp used the readymades to foil maintenance labor, which resulted in a limited artistic production, for maintenance labor permits all other work. The readymades stylize a subject whose identity would be bound up with, and structured by, the phenomenon of work. Instead, they offer humor and laziness, slapstick and play, modes of experience that gesture toward a different set of possibilities for how we might conceive of the everyday and how we might inhabit it.