

# INTERNATIONAL OBJECTS

## Perpetual Screw

"I very vividly in memory fall in love with my past lovers — as carrier of the sunmessage — as meaning of all-system: 'perpetual screw!' I see — how perishable they themselves were — how deteriorated in care and affection by time — as earthly things will — until they become dull mechanics — which I did not let suffer to happen — hence my utter loneliness — and had I understood more of the — outer life mashinery [sic] appertaining to emotion — to give it practical possibility — I should — and very plentifully at least could — have provided against such time as now." **Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Letter to Djuna Barnes, University of Maryland Libraries. c.1924 – 1927.**

For the second exhibition at International Objects, our focus turns to artworks that position tools and hardware as their subject. The veneration of (and corresponding trepidation towards) new technologies has been a constant throughout history across civilizations. The tools and materials devised by each generation represent a seemingly magical extension of human power, making inroads into the erstwhile realms of the divine.

The fruits of the industrial revolutions of Europe were showcased by revolutionary and imperial powers alike through spectacular exhibitions of new technologies. The *Exposition des produits de l'industrie française* was a celebration of French technology held from 1798 to 1849 that offered "a panorama of the productions of the various

branches of industry with a view to emulation."<sup>1</sup> In 1851 the *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations* was held in a Crystal Palace built for the occasion that allowed Britain to assert its superiority as a colonizing empire "in almost every field where strength, durability, utility and quality were concerned, whether in iron and steel, machinery or textiles."<sup>2</sup> The display of technologies, as evidenced by the history of exhibitions that have captured them, is a meaningful conflation of modernism with modernity.

As a counter-response to these showcased technologies, artists and artisans revalued handcraft for its distinctive presence against the standardized objects yielded by new machinery. An Arts and Crafts movement emerged in the second half of the 19th century as a riposte against the seizure of modes of production by emergent factory-style industrialization. Using tools with the added awareness of their symbolic potential, artists gave value to the materials and processes that were often the subject of the work itself.

These dynamics were all at play in 1917 when an exhibition to be hosted by the Society of Independent Artists in New York was being organized. Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven had sent an upended urinal, entitled *Fountain*, from Philadelphia to New York to Marcel Duchamp who subsequently submitted it for inclusion in the exhibition. The piece, produced by J. L. Mott Iron Works and later inscribed with the male pseudonym of the Baroness "R. Mutt," was unceremoniously rejected by the "unjuried" exhibition selection committee prompting Duchamp, a 'friend' of the Baroness, to resign from the group and bring the piece to the 5th Avenue studio of Alfred Stieglitz, where it was photographed and then lost or destroyed. In an article that appeared in the Dadaist journal *The Blind Man* following the exhibition<sup>3</sup> (which also included Stieglitz's documentation of *Fountain*), the editors came to the defense of Richard Mutt:

# THE BLIND MAN

## The Richard Mutt Case

*They say any artist paying six dollars may exhibit.*

*Mr. Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion this article disappeared and never was exhibited.*

*What were the grounds for refusing Mr. Mutt's fountain:—*

- 1. Some contended it was immoral, vulgar.*
- 2. Others, it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing.*

*Now Mr. Mutt's fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bath tub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see every day in plumbers' show windows.*

*Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object.*

*As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges.*

That same year, Baroness Elsa produced a similar sculpture comprised of a cast iron plumbing trap mounted atop a wooden miter box.<sup>4</sup> The work, entitled *God*, positions common hardware as a physical manifestation of the divine. Although this particular deification of vernacular hardware represented a paradigmatic shift in the art discourse of the time, the veneration of objects in such exhibitions had a history that preceded it. Regained was a connection of tools and hardware to the ethereal realms not unlike the synthesis of Vitruvius or Hero of Alexandria.<sup>5</sup>

Tools and hardware both express the objects that they are capable of producing and reflect the teleological expression of their user. When artists are presented with a hardware store, the store itself operates as an interface of sensible outcomes for the formation of their work. At times, the tools and materials take on an iconographic or political role or are themselves an emulation of the artists' labor or action. Or, per Baroness Elsa, hardware can be elevated to create a dogmatic vision—based in the material world where the imposition of an ordinary thing can “create a new thought for that object” akin to the gestural manipulations of a spiritual power.

- 1 Anne Dion-Tenenbaum, “Un âge d'or des arts décoratifs. 1814–1848”, from the catalog of October–November 1991 Grand Palais exhibition, Paris, 1991.
- 2 Yvonne Ffrench, “The Great Exhibition”, 1851, London: Harvill Press, 1950.
- 3 Anon., “The Richard Mutt Case,” *The Blind Man*, edited by Henri-Pierre Roche, Beatrice Wood, Marcel Duchamp, New York, no.2, May 1917.
- 4 A work “currently not on view” at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
- 5 Both Vitruvius (c.80–70 BC—after c.15 BC) and Hero von Alexandria (c.60 AD) were thinkers of classical antiquity who connected tools and building materials with the exploits of the divine. See Vitruvius “De architectura” or Hero von Alexandria “Treatise on Pneumatics”. An interesting note, the word pneumatics, here relating to air powered tools and instruments, takes its prefix from “pneuma” meaning “wind” or “breath” that (in Stoic thought) dually signified the spirit, soul, or creative force of a person.



Checklist  
Walkthrough

### Upcoming Thursdays at International Objects

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| Oct. 5  | Extended Hours with IO Bar   |
| Oct. 12 | Gryphon Rue performs electronic music with custom equipment and the musical saw.   |
| Oct. 19 | Extended Hours with IO Bar   |
| Oct. 26 | Screening of Chris Burden's videos <i>Big Wrench</i> and <i>The Big Wheel</i> , presented with Electronic Arts Intermix. |