

A CONVERSATION WITH...

mama|'mɛmɛ|まま

material authorship, meaning(ful/less) acts

A rest in the lives of...

American Standard™ Toilet (lid misplaced)

Stream Water

Soil (composted)

Assorted Uncultivated Flora, including lily pads and wildflowers (wild)

Walmart Inc. Orchids (GCG™, Oberlin, OH)

Over-The-Tank Roll Reserve by Mainstays™ (via Walmart Inc.)

“I love mommy, I love daddy” Synthetic Fabric

White Cotton Denim

Leftover Wire and Acrylic Paint (black) from the Artist's Studio

Paper, Pin, Graphite left behind by Cornell Students, Fall 2019

Following the Big Fucking Art Show, mama|'mɛmɛ|まま will settle in the woods.

Metaphors will unmix, growing with the hierarchy of materials.

As it is, mama is a scatological meme.

Presented at the Big Fucking Art (BFA) Show at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Ithaca, NY, 10/26/2020-10/30/2020, and Outdoors, 10/31/2020-Indefinitely.



INTRODUCTION

When Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" (1917) was rejected from an "open" exhibit hosted by the Society of Independent Artists, it fundamentally shifted the world's approach to art. Though the Society was dedicated to the advancement of new forms, it was challenged by an innocuous urinal signed by the fictional artist "R. Mutt." Perhaps they disliked the apparent lack of effort in preparing this "readymade" manufactured object. Perhaps it was thought too crude, or it just didn't "do" much for its audience. Though never exhibited publicly, "Fountain" is immensely influential as absurd, unconventional, elegant, illogical, provocative art. Duchamp directly defied artistic conventions, paving the way for a century of creators. Yet it seems that every artist who engages with the urinal—and there are many amusing iterations—compromises its pure "Dadaism" by imposing new layers of meaning. Today, the toilet is readily accepted within the artistic syntax: for the form to remain "Dada," must one challenge "Fountain's" establishment status?

You have a choice. For those who'd like to consider "mama" as it is, shift your eyes from these words to the documentation they accompany, observe and reflect as you're inclined. For those who seek meaning, welcome. I don't intend to completely distort your perception of my assemblage by depending on lofty articulations to validate my work. Rather, it seems appropriate to reflect on, even defend "mama" in the context of this second edition of *The New Twenties*. Following its rejection, "Fountain" was initially publicized in the second edition of *The Blind Man* (1917-1917), a magazine published by the New York Dadaists. Duchamp's peers felt the need to clarify its existence through an amusing "review" presented, like the original sculpture, under a pseudonym. It reads as self-aware satire while compellingly defending "Fountain's" status as art. Perhaps this reflection will read similarly.

DADA vs. MAMA

When I was born, my mother took me in her arms and introduced herself: 「ママだよ!」 ("It's your mama!"). Nine months passed before I uttered my first word: "dada." Every object, every person was "dada." Never once did I call my mother "mama," she was always お母さん.

It's time for reparation: today, I propose Mamaism. Mama is the better half to Duchamp's Dada. Mama is smothering objects with intention until they're meaningless. Mama births its creations into a cluttered nonsensical world, bringing new objects into conversations with old Dada. Mama's intentions are vague, but her care is palpable. Mama is a redirection of Dada, though both may seem aloof. But Mama is put together with enough compassion that anyone can grasp something within her wealth of meaning. Duchamp's contemporaries questioned if his urinal was immoral... is it disrespectful to liken my mother to a toilet? That's up to you, but she thinks it's funny.

"Mama" isn't necessarily pro- or anti-Dada, it is rather a reaction *and* conformance to the state of art. As Dadaism reflects on life through novel perceptions of art, I seek to reflect on art through fresh considerations of life; Duchamp brought commercial items to the public eye, and now it's time for the natural to overtake the artificial.

WORDPLAY

“R. Mutt 1917” were the only words accompanying Duchamp’s submission. There was plenty in this name: “R” stands for “Richard,” French slang for “money-bags;” “Armut” means “poor” in German; the urinal was produced by “Mott Works.” Wordplay was integral to Duchamp’s practice, subtly linking a urinary receptacle to reflections on social hierarchy. Or not. Regardless of meaning, Duchamp utilizes language to promote a common object to the artistic sphere.

“A.S. Julie” is a reference designed for no one to understand, an esoteric namedrop worthy of its museum context. Academia revolves around often unnecessarily minute analysis, so I invite “A.S.” to be read as “Adam Shulman” (me), “American Standard” (toilet brand), or “August Strindberg” (playwright), whose problematic modernist, naturalist, symbolist play, *Miss Julie* (1888), changed the course of theater. Strindberg’s preface presents everything he considered wrong with the state of theater, a snarky criticism worthy of *The Blind Man*. Like “Fountain,” a primary focus of *Miss Julie* is social stratification. A lower-class character, Jean, recounts a childhood memory in which he explored a Count’s private privy, a lavish Turkish bath, before nearly being discovered and forced to plunge through a “lower” exit. But “mama’s” toilet is clogged with earth, there’s no room to escape. This particular moment from this particular play by a particular playwright with those particular initials imposes economic connotations on the project, but they are ultimately inconsequential in relation to the sculpture’s life. Removed from the museum and placed outside, the painted signature will wash off in the rain, rendering it anonymous and erasing such references. The conversation between Duchamp, Strindberg, and myself may briefly prove thought-provoking, but I hold no grand illusions of our relationship. I too will disappear from “mama” until it is nothing more than a bowl of murky water.

The three titular components, “mama|’mɛmɛ|まま,” read identically: from left to right, they are the Standard English, International Phonetic Association, and Japanese Hiragana spellings. Again, I harness the inaccessibility of the specialized knowledge required to understand these allusions. The final line of my statement is the key to this puzzle: *As it is, mama is a scatological meme*. “Mama” incurs feelings of maternity; “’mɛmɛ” is a middle ground between the languages that visually resembles the word “meme,” a forgettable form of creative mimicry often utilizing humor at the intellectual level of the scatological; in my mother’s language, “まま” means “a state of being,” or “as it is.” More important than the reveal of the cryptic title is the state of non-understanding. The title allows concept to exist beyond the list of materials. Temporarily.

SIGNAGE/FRAME

The Big Fucking Art Show is an annual student-run showcase (*aside*: I take great pride in the fact that I suggested its name during freshman year, my greatest contribution thus far to Cornell’s BFA legacy). This year, the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art allowed us to display within its esteemed walls. Relegated to an alcove adjacent to a set of monoprints reading “VOTE,” “mama” was framed by three museum walls. The front of the bowl peeked over the threshold, breaking into the main gallery space. Curling from the right wall was a large sheet of paper containing, in my own handwriting, the statement copied at the top of this essay.

I am tired by the degree to which artists and curators deprive the responsibility of perception from the viewer. Even if “art” is a platform to promote convolutions of intention, concept, and

technicality, it doesn't have to be taught. Too often, artist's statements and gallery labels ease a work "down" to the viewer's level. Let us think for ourselves! Though now I present my intentions to you, the gallery audience was meant to draw their own conclusions from only the title and list of materials, a lifeline hinting at—but not explicitly providing—the intent of the project. Perhaps art cannot escape scholarship, but it doesn't always need annotation. An artist's statement constrains art in relation to the artist. The "mamaist" way is letting loose the reigns of concept and allowing viewers to draw their own conclusions with a slight nudge in the right direction. I made the sculpture for fun. I made the sign for art. Off to the side hangs the hint of a concept, ignorable.

Imagine a clear label printed in Arial. Impersonal, detached, uniform, a third-person restatement, art jargon contextualizing what our eyes see. Two days before the BFA Show, the organizing committee offered participants the option to submit such a statement to be pasted next to our work. I did not ask to be labeled, I did not seek identification with my project, yet my name appeared on the wall. It's amusing how eagerly viewers, especially other creators, accept most anything as art. Thanks to Duchamp, the curators felt it necessary to go out of their way to include my toilet among the other artworks.

My own handwriting allows personal yet anonymous ownership over the project. Instead of allowing the curator to pull focus, I present my own vague intentions and hints of allusion. Plants, textiles, and thoughts enter the gallery to be recognized under this presentational setting before returning to the outside world and living on in new forms. Like the presence of "A.S. Julie," the handwritten definitions will fade in the weather. Material form will outlive the concept as references unravel. Convolutioned meanings become irrelevant once the project fades from visitors' memory.

MATERIAL

It's not every day one comes across a spare toilet. And I'm fairly sure this toilet didn't expect to be removed from its cushy position in a professor's home, discarded on a curb, and carted half a mile to a gallery. It transformed from a basic utility to a vessel for contemplation. In its artificial gallery setting, "Fountain" celebrates the extraordinary potential of the commonplace. "Mama" confines the natural within the ordinary, to be considered through the gallery's intense artificial lens. Following a week in an esteemed museum, I brought "mama" outside, laying the arrangement to rest in a natural setting, and relieving the materials from the pressure of scrutiny.

"Mama" did not exist before its assemblage in the museum. Each component was either "readymade," "readygrown," or discarded. Handmade, natural, and artificial products followed their own trajectories to the alcove, after which the hand of the artist was replaced by the hand of time. Of the materials, the branded components are most durable: the American Standard™ toilet and Mainstays™ toilet paper holders will remain consistent the longest, followed by the skeuomorphic fabric TP. Replacing typical disposable bath tissues with soft textile wrapped on a sustainable wire frame, one faces a conundrum: in order to wipe with that which is better for the world, one must make the effort to wash away one's wasteful footprint. The human trace also remains in the ugly Walmart-bought hybridized orchid, which, before its inevitable death in the Ithaca cold, will remain colorful long after the chlorophyll fades from the neighboring plants.

SCATOLOGY/ECOLOGY

Growth and excretion are fundamental to all life. Japanese Ikebana, literally “living flower” arrangement, celebrates the ephemeral beauty of plucked flowers. Birthed from Dadaism and Japanese traditions, “mama” follows the trajectory of a living artwork. Flora compete to the death over a small portion of composted earth. Spilling over the sides of the tank, lily pads and water-grass grasp for life as they wither. Dadaism is somewhat nonsensical... isn't human life the most Dada form of creation? The true effect of developing the world is so harmful that it seems fundamentally inexplicable.

The death of the water-plants was revelatory. At first, they seemed at peace floating in murky stream water drawn from behind my apartment. On the second day of the show, a slight film of oil rose to the surface, perhaps the result of the settling sediment. But by the third and fourth days, a viscous sludge reeking like sewage congealed across the tank. Rather alarmed, I reported the pollution to my neighborhood's Village Engineer. We identified two issues: the stream ran brown with erosion from nearby construction, and the pond plants had absorbed a frightening volume of pollutants. Death released human contaminants from the idyllic Monet-esque leaves. Human waste, an element of the commercialism seen in Duchamp's work, defines the ecological future.

Discussing the future of the earth is far more important than reflecting on what constitutes art. Initially, I had hoped the ecological components of “mama” would overtake the human-made. Indoors, outdoors, the toilet will outlast most living forms it encounters. In a sense, its current placement at the threshold of a lawn and the woods allows the natural world to overtake the relatively small object. Yet it shines white, a dominating human presence surrounded by the growth.

FEMINISM?

Though ecological preservation is paramount, we must continue to develop the integrity of our societies. This is non-destructive progress. The American trajectory seems to revolve around self-fulfillment and equality. By name and signature, “mama” addresses the feminist progress of the century since Duchamp. A urinal is replaced by Julie's toilet, seat lowered. Fabric, crucial to 20th Century feminist art, replaces wasteful toilet paper. Make what you will of having to wipe yourself with “I love mommy, I love daddy.” But consider the “American Standard” of life, grounded in consumption and the status quo. The constructed rolls show two standards, the white of generic gallery walls, and the natural yet normative love of a mother and father. To progress further, we are forced to address and wipe away what is normal. If that's too difficult, we can always wipe with leaves.

CONCLUSION

“Mama” contextualizes states of living and creation within a materialist framework. It is a carefully proposed joke, an amusing and serious assessment of art. Rooted in the history of Dadaism, it doesn't need to develop into its own movement. Words fade, plants return to dirt, but the magic and potential of thought exist forever.

Like “Fountain” and *The Blind Man*, “mama” and this accompanying essay serve somewhat as institutional critique. But aren’t every art students’ creations and reflections fundamentals of the institution? No, I give myself too much credit: daddy Duchamp’s “art world” will live on as an economic powerhouse, prioritizing money and material as much as intellectual and emotional stimulation. More important than the conflict of economic vs. world-bettering art is the fact that creation defines what it means to be human. There will always be a platform for the conscious, those who try to make sense of social and environmental needs.

Humankind’s nature is to destroy and create, we eat and we shit. Art is an ultimate form of humanity: though perception varies, the unified experience is a necessary pleasure. Dadaism, in whatever form, is pure creation. To share in an out-of-the-ordinary creation is to achieve a unique, sophisticated, utterly human interaction. Art is the state of this wonky world. Please create yours.