

# The reinvention of the ready-made

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**Abstract:** In this paper the history of a particular type of product design is analyzed, compared and structured. The analyzed products are all of the type where existing objects are used or even incorporated into the design. This principle is known in the art world as the ready-made. In this research transformational- and composed ready-mades and several variations are described. The design principle of using existing objects in designs is then compared with the relation between novelty and typicality as predictors of aesthetic preference, as researched by Hekkert et al. From there it is argued that the ready-made principle could possibly contribute to designing pleasurable products because the resulting objects incorporate both novelty and typicality in their presence.

**Key words:** *Novelty, Typicality, Ready-made, Unruly design, Design history.*

## 1. Introduction

Historical analysis reveals that some recent developments in conceptual design have origins in the transfiguration of commonplace objects by Surrealist artists back in the 1930s. Especially so-called “transformational ready-mades” are of interest with respect to emotional response and aesthetic preference. Recapturing Hekkert’s research into the correlation of typicality and novelty in the aesthetic perception of objects [1], we can argue for the use of everyday product attributes when designing emotionally involving products.

This paper is part of a research into the history of unruly design, which aims at finding theoretical background for the design of everyday things in a postmodern society [2]. After the final decline of modernism in the 1980’s the motto for unruly designing became “anything goes” (after Paul Feyerabend: ‘the only principle which does not inhibit progress is *anything goes*’ [3]). Common research about design history on this subject focuses mostly on the role of design *meaning*, especially the implications of postmodern design and their successors on a contemporary society dominated by images [4-5]. However, when comparing postmodern- and conceptual designs over the decades from a design *method* perspective, it seems that there is just a limited set of design principles (and practices) that stands at the base of somewhat all of this unruly design. This research thus presents a particular part of design history as a means of how to *implement* postmodern meaning into designs. This is best illustrated by the product communication model of Crilly et al. [6], where the design of a product acts as a transmitter for the designers intent at the one side, steering the consumer’s response on the other (Figure.1).

The deconstruction of unruly design in this research concentrates on the left side of the model. One of the resulting limited set of design principles is the *ready-made*, or the use of found footage in the design of new objects, which will be presented in this paper.

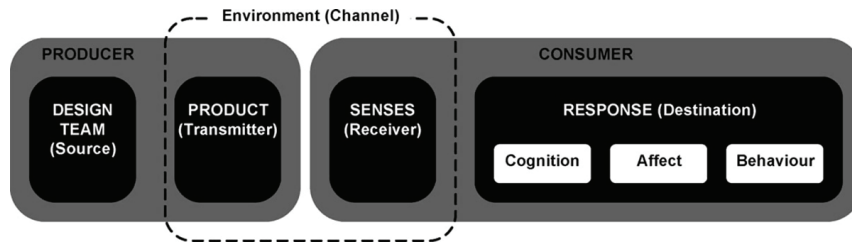


Figure.1 Crilly et al. – Basic framework for design as a process of communication

## 2. Ready-mades and Objet-Trouvées

Recently Dutch jewelry designer Ted Noten [7-8] presented a series of jewelry that formed a surprising addition to the history of unruly design objects. His Pig-bracelet (Figure.2) and accompanying rings are inventive in both design process and mode of production.



Figure.2 (left) Ted Noten – ‘Pig Bracelet’ – 2009  
(right) The found objects that formed the shape

The shape of the bracelet is formed by combining the inner tube of a scooter, a second hand kitsch pig sculpture and a pearl necklace. The installation (Figure.2) was scanned and copied on a smaller scale with rapid prototyping techniques. With this project, Ted Noten adds a new chapter to a long history of ready-made designs. Surrealist artist Marcel Duchamp is considered the first to have exhibited an artwork based on a found object. In art history this type of artwork is called a *ready-made*, or an *objet-trouvé* in French (because the Surrealist movement was led by the French poet André Breton [9]). From that time on, that Marcel Duchamp exhibited his urinal and bottle-rack (Figure.3) there are examples of products that seem to have come into being ‘spontaneously’ from found objects. Besides the direct transformation (or upgrading) of the toiletry into an artwork, much later ‘invented’ again by Andy Warhol, when he putted Soap Boxes (Figure.4) in the museum in 1964, a lot of variants on this principle have been contrived.



Figure.3 (left) Bottle-rack of the same model as Surrealist artist Marcel Duchamp 'upgraded' into an artwork in 1914 [10], this one being still in use in 2006 at a French farm in the neighbourhood of Autun.  
(right) Gallery Ratton, Paris – 1936: exhibition of Surrealist art with the bottle-rack on display [11]. (Visible in the background at the right, is Salvador Dalí's *Aphrodisiac Jacket* with cocktail glasses applied)



Figure.4 Andy Warhol – 'Boxes' - 1964

## 2.1 Ready-made typology

The soap boxes and the bottle rack are ready-mades where the found objects themselves stay the same, but the context transforms. As a result they receive a new function (as an artwork) from their new context (the art gallery). When later (in the 1980s) the Neue Design in Germany, the Punk in England and the Post Modernists in Italy used the ready-made principle in product design, there emerged different variants of this principle. Sometimes the function of the object stays the same, and sometimes the context (Figure.5).

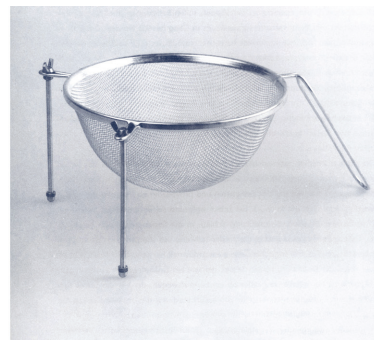


Figure.5 (left) Ron Arad – 'Rover bench' – 1981; the function of the chairs stays the same, but the context (the living room) is new. (right) Axel Stumpf – 'Früchteschale' 1984; a kitchen strainer transformed into a fruit bowl. The function of the object is transformed, but the context (the kitchen) stays the same.

Also, the direct upgrading of the found objects has evolved into a sort of transformation or combination of the objet-trouvées. The objects are modified, built together, or adjusted to the needs of their new function and context (Figure.6). In this research we speak of the transformational ready-made when the original object is transformed or adjusted for its new life. When several objects are combined and built together we speak of composed ready-mades.

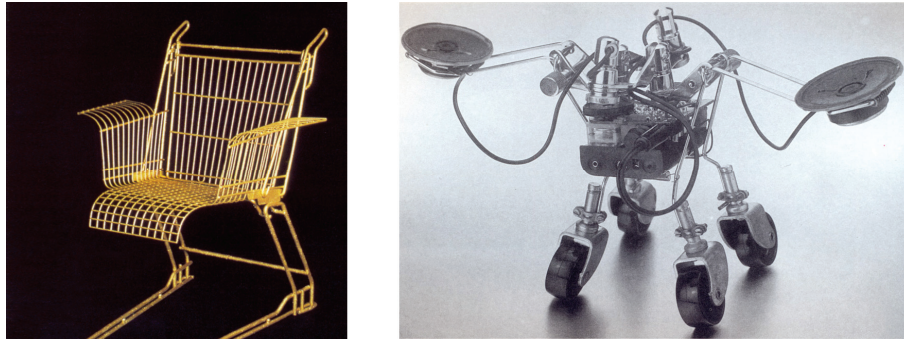


Figure.6 (left) Stiletto Studio's – 'Consumer Rest No.11' – 1983/1986; a transformational ready-made. (right) Marzio Rusconi Clerici and Laura Agnoletto – 'Vollucela' radio – 1986; a combination (or actually a hotchpotch) of found parts, to form a composed ready-made.

With the so-called conceptual designers of the '90s, gathered around the Dutch Droog label of Gijs Bakker and Renny Ramakers [12], the ready-made principle again came back into habit. Designer Marcel Wanders, rather famous for his 'Knotted Chair', stacked ordinary lampshades to form a new lamp, where the repetition of the objects made a new contribution to the principle. The effect of the stacking was reinforced by the gradually degrading light-intensity within the object (Figure.7). Once again this is a composed ready-made.

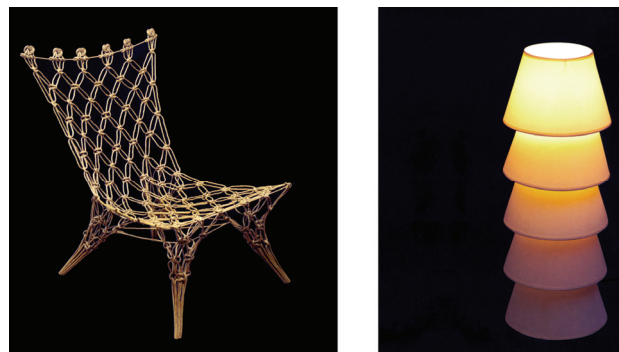


Figure.7 (left) Marcel Wanders – 'Knotted Chair' – 1995 and 'Setup Shades' lamp – 1989 [9] (right)

## 2.2 Evolution of the ready-made

In the same period Jurgen Bey and Jan Konings transformed objects by packing them in a different material (Figure.8). Eventually this was done before by Les Levine, when he covered a Captains-chair with thermoplastic material, displayed at the exhibition "The Object Transformed" in het Museum of Modern Art in New York, from June 28<sup>th</sup> until August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1966. In the accompanying catalog it reads: 'The transformation of these three objects [it refers also to two other chair objects] is brought about by covering them with an extraneous material which destroys their usefulness but presumably preserves the objects themselves.' [13, p.8].



Figure.8 Jurgen Bey and Jan Konings – ‘Kokon’ table/chair – 1997/1999, comparable with the fur covered cup and saucer made by Meret Oppenheim. Through the packaging in another material, the objects receive an emotional appeal and new shapes emerge (but they remain recognizable).

In the end this whole covering-up was also comparable with a Surrealist predecessor; the fur-covered cup and saucer by Meret Oppenheim (Figure.9), which is rather famous: ‘*Objet*, as it was called first, was created for the *Exposition surréaliste d'objets*, held at the *Gallery Ratton* in May 1936, where it immediately became the archetype of the surrealist object. Breton renamed the object *Le déjeuner en fourrure* (Breakfast in Fur), what reminded of the scandalous connotations of female sexuality attached with Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (1863) and the sexual fetishism that was implied by the equivoque on the title of Leopold Ritter von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz* (La Vénus à la fourrure) uit 1870.’ Ghislaine Wood in [10, p.24].

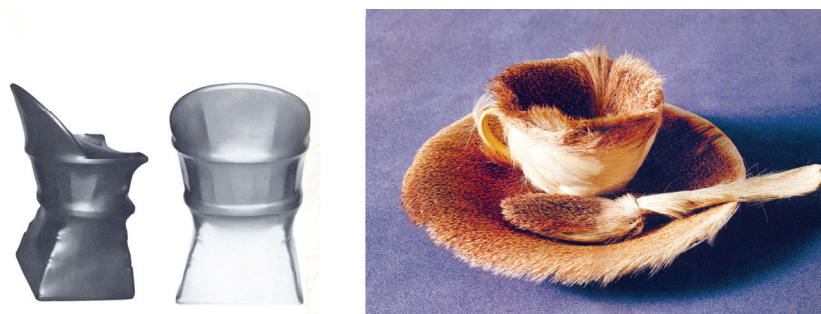


Figure.9 (left) Les Levine – ‘Untitled’ – 1965.  
(right) Meret Oppenheim – ‘Breakfast in Fur’ – 1936.

Dutch designer Tejo Remy did something comparable to the covering up with his “Chest of Drawers”. Existing second hand drawers of all sorts were packed with a beech casing and piled together with a strap. This was clever, because the standardized casing made the drawers look like they belong together, while their individual vintage charm remained (Figure.10). Design critic Aaron Betsky argued that the object merely stands for the collection of *all* cupboards, while all the separate drawers refer to different furniture styles: ‘The result looks happenstance, and may not be the most logical chest of drawers, but it becomes a microcosm of all chests one has seen, stripped of the constraint the designer usually puts on such a piece of furniture by choosing one style for a frame.’ [14, p.172]. The cupboard also has an interesting functionality feature in the end; it is easier to remind that you have put something in the “little yellow drawer” than in the “fifth drawer from above”.



Figure.10 Tejo Remy – ‘Chest of drawers’ – 1991  
A combination of transformational- and composed ready-made.

Another special way of transforming an objet-trouvée was created by Jurgen Bey with his ‘Lamp Shade Shade’ (Figure.11). Through the half transparent one-way-mirror shielding an existing (kitsch) chandelier receives an uncluttered shape, which makes it fashionable for contemporary interiors. In the meantime it creates an intriguing layered appearance. At first it was designed for the Droog collection with a conical shape, resembling the traditional lampshade archetype. Currently it is a commercial success within the Moooi label of Marcel Wanders (with a straight cover as in Figure.12).

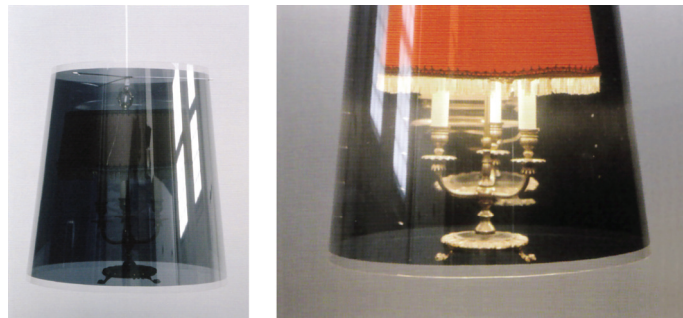


Figure.11 Jurgen Bey – Lamp ‘Shade Shade’ – 1999

This type of transformation of an existing object is merely a very sophisticated version of the upgrading of a second hand chair from the flea-market with apple-green paint. Something all of us (could) have done sometimes when being a student (Figure.12). In the late 1970s Alessandro Mendini painted several cupboards from the 1940s with wild patterns. This would currently be named “pimp my cupboard”. This project also instigated the more renowned Proust sofa, a classic baroque chair covered with colourful dots like a pointillist paintwork. More recently conceptual designers picked up the process again. For the project ‘the Dutch Room’ in St Petersburg (at the 300<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the city of St Petersburg) Jurgen Bey covered antique chairs with fibreglass and silkscreened them with a floral pattern.



Figure.12 (*left*) Alessandro Mendini – ‘Furniture of no Return’ – 1978  
(*right*) Jurgen Bey – ‘St Petersburg’ chairs – 2003, at the ceiling a straight instance of the ‘Shade Shade’ chandelier.

Dutch designer Piet Hein Eek, who became rather famous with his scrap-wood furniture, advances this upgrading- and transformation process further by building cupboards around second hand doors (Figure.13). In this way the ready-made serves as just a start for the design of the whole object: ‘The wroughtful material and former application of each door tell their own story. [...] They are incorporated as a source of inspiration in the resulting cupboard, in a way that the design decisions are transparent and comprehensible’ [15, p.44]. The existing door becomes the basis of (the character of) the cupboard, and in the meantime the cupboard serves as a platform or stage for the original door itself.



Figure.13 (*left*) Piet Hein Eek – ‘Kerkraamkast’ – 1994 [“church-window-cupboard”] and other examples of a series of one-off cupboards [12].

This process of taking a found object as a base for the design and building the complete product around it, is however at least much older. As an example, the stool-with-tractor-seat of the Castiglioni brothers is a postmodern design avant-la-lettre (Figure.14). Although functionalistic in its minimal structure, it is constructed from recognizable shapes like a composed ‘objet trouvé’. Within the same idea the Castiglioni brothers also designed a

stool with a bicycle saddle as a seat [16]. The shape of this seat is not ‘inspired on’, but literally copied from a tractor. On the other hand the seat is just a *part* of the complete stool.

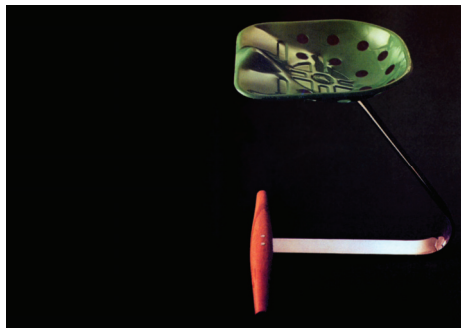


Figure.14 Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni – ‘Mezzadro’ stool – 1955.

The same principle is apparent in the door-bell by Peter van der Jagt, the chandelier by Rody Graumans, and even the salon table from Naylor en Ball (Figure.15 and 16). These objects are all composed of literally incorporated recognizable parts. The real bohemian crystal glasses of the object by van der Jagt provide a nice sound for this bell. The metaphor that the glasses provide for the sound is very well thought of; everybody knows that the gesture for getting attention at a party dinner is ticking your glass. And getting attention happens to be precisely the function of the door bell. The entire shape of the chandelier by Rody Graumans is cleverly composed from standard parts. Especially the sphere of electricity connectors forms an intriguing functional and ornamental part. The transparent table by Naylor and Ball eventually, is a composed ready-made that is, like the doorbell by van der Jagt, metaphorically very clever conceived. The authors quote: ‘The legs - glass cleaning bottles - support and maintain the glass top. Glass tops are often a pretext for the display of legs. Here the legs ensure their own visibility. Mr Muscle is the ‘clear’ choice for the cleaning bottle brand because of the name’s implied supporting leg strength.’ [17, p.67]. The rather collage-like technique of all these designs, of course owns debt to the famous Bull head sculpture of Picasso, composed from a bicycle saddle and -steering rod in 1942 [18] (Figure.16). Picasso, being an artist that in his turn was influenced by the Surrealists of that period, brings back the ready-made history at its beginning.

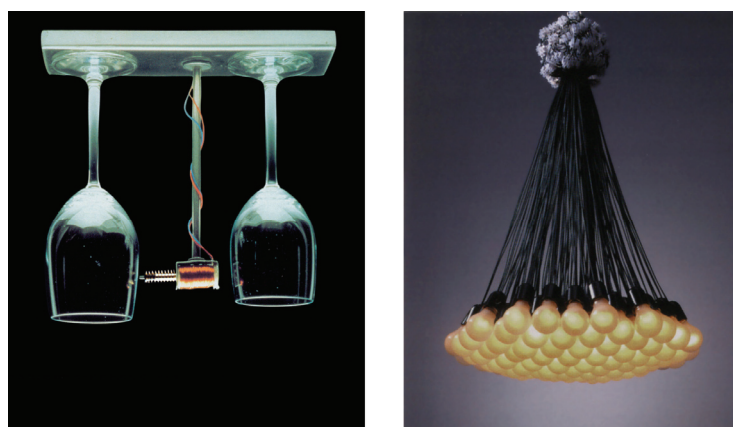


Figure.15 (right) Peter van der Jagt – ‘Bottoms-up’ Door-bell – 1993  
(left) Rody Graumans – lamp ‘85 bulbs’ – 1993

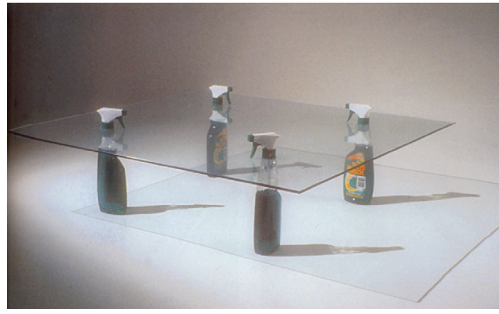


Figure.16 (left) Maxine Naylor and Ralph Ball – ‘Transparent table’ – 1997  
(right) Pablo Picasso – ‘Tête de taureau’ – 1942

### 3. The rationale of the ready-made

Werner Spies states from the objects of Meret Oppenheim: ‘The operations to which Oppenheim subjected things arose the viewer's suspicion, sharpened his hermeneutic senses. The short-circuiting of logic that occurred when incompatible things and concepts were brought together supplied the energy for the emotional vision which Surrealism attempted to set free.’ in [11, p.22]. Gwendolyn Ristant states even clearer from the German “Neue Design” in the 1980s: ‘This is one of the keynotes of "New Design", the presentation of familiar things in an unfamiliar light, so that irritation will allow us to gain a new experience of objects.’ [19, p.209].

Arthur C. Danto argued from the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, that by putting the ‘commonplace objects’ into the museum, they became to share their properties with other artworks [20]. In that way discerning them from their supermarket counterparts, although they are not different at all in a physical way. By putting the objects in a different surrounding, the objects themselves change in a way that we look at them differently, and therefore judge them differently. The associations and habits of the ‘art world’ are projected on the Fountain and the Brillo Box, while in turn the associations of urinals and soap boxes are projected onto the art world. ‘As a work of art, the Brillo Box does more than insist that it is a brillo box under surprising metaphoric attributes. It does what works of art have always done - externalizing a way of viewing the world, expressing the interior of a cultural period, offering itself as a mirror to catch the conscience of our kings.’ [20, p208]. So putting commonplace objects in a new surrounding teaches us to view mere things in a different light. This new surrounding, or context, can also be provided by other things, like within the composed ready-made itself. The door mat with singing bird, ‘Cicalino’, by Italian postmodernist designer Denis Santachiarra illustrates this nicely (Figure.17).

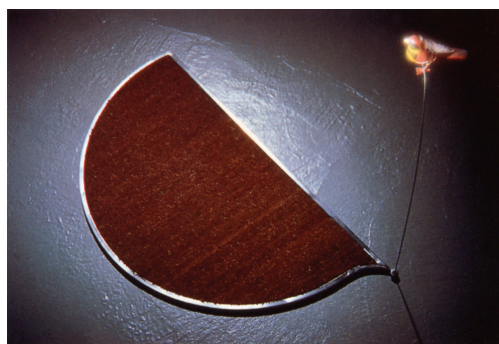


Figure.17 Denis Santacharia – ‘Cicalino’ door mat – 1992, with whistling little bird [18].

When entering the house the door mat will render the user both a new conscience of the bird, where he or she is confronted with so suddenly, as well of a new perspective on the door mat itself. De latter is, by the addition of the singing bird, transformed from an anonymous thing into an active object [21]. The user is made conscience of the action of entering the house, and the sweeping of the feet becomes an ‘experience’.

#### 4. Connecting novelty and typicality

In their illustrative research on typicality, novelty and aesthetic preference, Hekkert, Snelders and van Wieringen [1] conclude that people have aesthetic preference for objects that are both typical and novel. They couple this combined preference with at the famous motto of Raymond Loewy: ‘In sum, it seems that our results provide an empirical basis for the industrial design principle coined MAYA by Raymond Loewy [22], MAYA being an acronym for Most Advanced Yet Acceptable. In order to create a successful design, the designer should strike a balance between novelty and typicality in trying to be as innovative as possible while preserving, as much as possible, the typicality of the design. The fact that this is feasible is due to the fact that the correlation between novelty and typicality, although highly negative, falls short from being perfect.’ [1, p.122]. In fact, the interpretation by Hekkert et al. turns the Maya principle into a very useful tool. The transformation of terms puts an end to the endless discussions on whether an advanced design is still acceptable or too advanced, because now a new design should be both advanced [novel] *and* acceptable [typical]. This is of course only possible when typicality and novelty are considered two different variables, and not each other’s opposites. This is best understood when the opposite of typical is seen as *different*, and the opposite of novel is seen as *expected*. The red “Ericophone” in (Figure.18) is then an example of a telephone design where both typicality and novelty score high. Novel because of the upright position of the handset (with the dial at the bottom of the base) and typical because of the familiar shape and form-language of the handset, that is copied from the traditional black model.

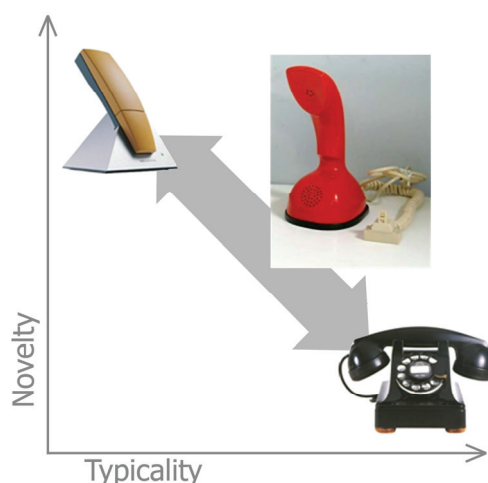


Figure.18 Example of the relationship between novelty and typicality in telephone designs. The grey arrow depicts the (normal) highly negative correlation

Combining the short history of unruly design with the philosophical stance of Arthur C. Danto, one can say that the ready-made, in all its presented forms, is a special occasion of design objects, where the correlation between novelty and typicality is not that negative. By setting known products in a new context, the familiarity of the ready-made provides the typicality and the new context provides the novelty factor. Just as Mildred Constantine

and Arthur Drexler already stated: ‘The emotional content we associate with any object depends on more than the object alone. Hidden associations may be revealed when one object is related to another, or otherwise taken out of its familiar context, or when even a single detail is removed or altered. If the resulting visual metaphor is sufficiently powerful, even the most ubiquitous artifact may be transformed into an object of emotional rather than practical utility’. [13, p.6]



Figure.19 Marcel Duchamp – ‘Fountain’ [Fuente] – 1917 (remake 1964)

## 5. Discussion

Novelty is of course an attribute that is restricted over time, and typicality is influenced by culture. So when *Fountain* (Figure.19) is seen as a mere object back in 1917, its typicality is high as a urinal of that particular period. When regarded as an object of art, its typicality is low, because urinals (or simple objects as such) were never to be exhibited as art before. But when looking back now, the novelty of putting *porcelainerie* in the museum as an artwork is rather low because the exhibition of ready-mades in art has become a common principle (since Andy Warhol). Secondly, as design is a cultural phenomenon [23], the typicality of *Fountain* as a urinal has degraded over time, because the design of urinals has evolved. The brief history of ready-mades in design, with the example of the use of the latest technology by Ted Noten in particular, however showed us that it is possible to use and renew the objet-trouvée principle in different periods of time and cultural context.



Figure.20 (left) YUBZ™ – ‘Talk Mobile’ – 2006, cellular phone extension (YUBZ™ is an acronym for “Why you busy?”). (right) Oskar de Kieffe – ‘Converted Porsche 924’ (the fourth one in the row) – 1996

In the current analysis the use of the ‘ready-made principle’ is rather limited to artistic objects, furniture, kitchenware and jewelry. Even so, most examples are from the more artist oriented author driven design practice,

rather than demand driven industrial engineering design [2]. The Talk Mobile cellular phone accessory by the Las Vegas firm YUBZ is one of the few examples outside these boundaries (Figure.20).

## 6. Conclusion

It is a subject for further research if the principle is also of use for designing more complex products. The converted car by Dutch artist Oskar de Kieffe provides a witty hint with its reversed exterior (Figure.20). If it is, the ready-made principle can contribute to designing pleasurable products because the resulting objects incorporate both novelty *and* typicality in their presence.

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