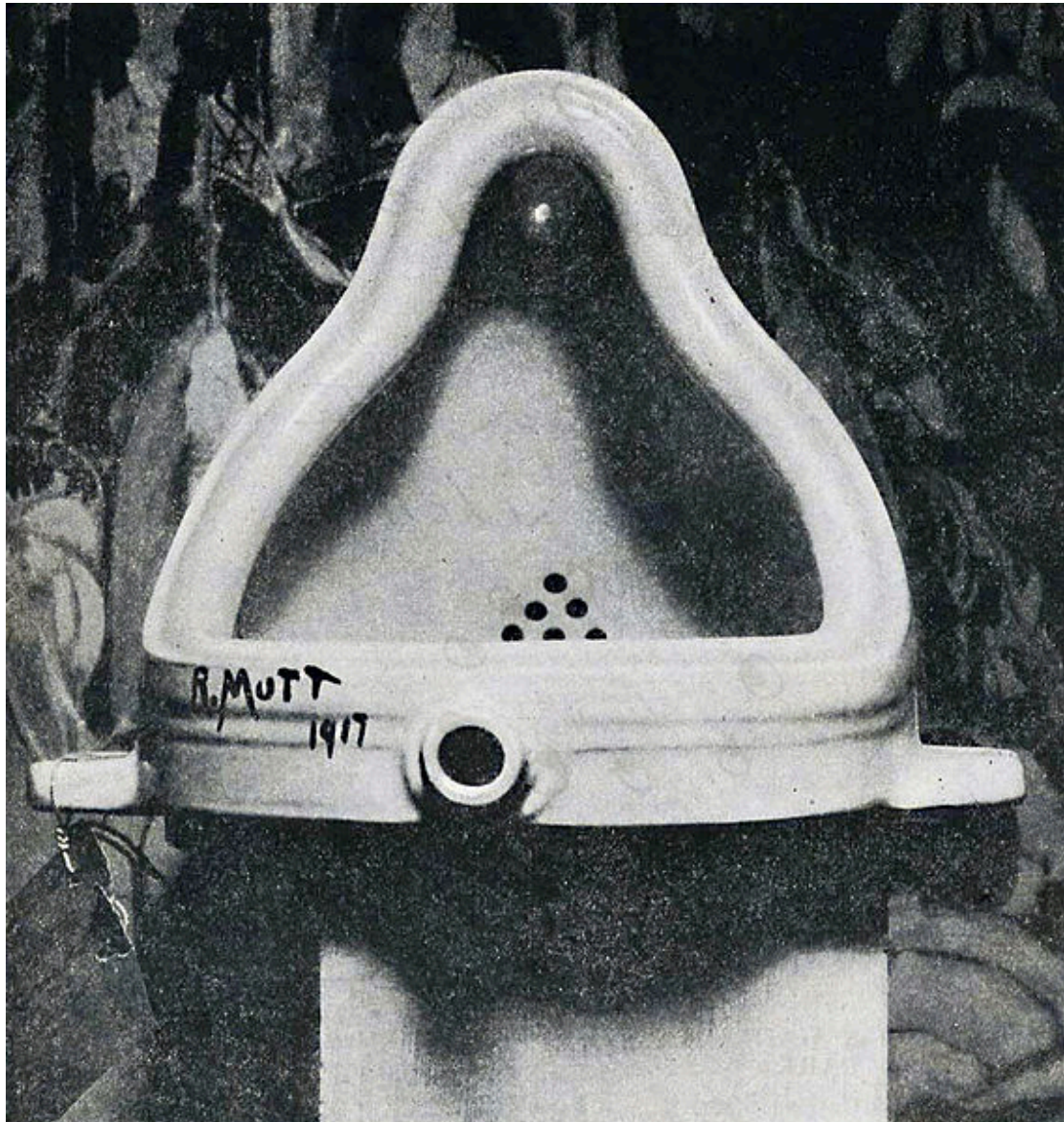


# A Short History of Art World Potty Humor

Eleanor Lambert — Oct 16 2016



*Fountain.* published May 1917, New York. Photo: Alfred Stieglitz

Soon, the art world will celebrate the centennial of Marcel Duchamp's (or should we say R. Mutt's) urinal sculpture, *Fountain*. Despite its current status as an acclaimed and pivotal artwork, the ready-made installation was not initially received as such, called "indecent," and decidedly not installed as part of a Grand Central Palace art show in 1917. Effectively censoring creative expression, the decision deemed that *Fountain* "may be a very useful object in its place, but its place is not in an art exhibition and it is, by no definition, a work of art." A century later, classifying a urinal as incompatible with "a work of art" due to its presumed indecency is just as poignant as ever.



*America. Image courtesy the Guggenheim Museum*

Today, “the transgressive loop” set by Duchamp is met by *America*, a fully-functioning, pure 24k gold toilet created by Italian-born artist Maurizio Cattelan and currently housed in a single bathroom at New York’s Guggenheim museum. Demolishing the generally-upheld boundaries between artwork and its beholders, *America* offers museum-goers a chance to interact with a piece of art by releasing their bodily excrements onto it.

How people may choose to treat the artwork in their allotted alone time with it is “part of the game,” according to Cattelan. Merging the decidedly lowbrow with the gaudiness of pure gold, the cleverly-named *America* is what he calls “1% art for the 99%,” and it reaches beyond the simple breaking of art’s cardinal “Look, Don’t Touch” rule. Bridging the divide between the demographics of a free-market-defined world, an intersection emerges in the form of a golden crapper.

As capitalism continues to discriminatively rank the globe by gender, class, ability, and identity, these scatological artworks invert the highbrow/lowbrow polarities and reorganize the boundaries around what, how, and by whom art is constituted and consumed.





*The Toilet. Image courtesy of Yoshua Okón*

Mexican artist Yoshua Okón collaborated with Santiago Sierra, producing a piece named *The Toilet*. The sculpture is the exact shape and style of Mexico City's Soumaya Museum, which was commissioned by Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim and whose personal art collection resides there. *The Toilet* is meant to invoke and critique the ever-expanding reach of the global capitalism through a Mexico City lens. Both Slim and The Soumaya are symbols of deregulated corporate power, and together they emblemize what Okon calls “the dark side of capitalism.” Juxtaposing the museum—and the perceived affluence and elegance therein—against the apparently unsophisticated imagery of a toilet works distinctly to hold this “corporate culture” accountable for the “darker underbelly” looming beneath the seeming “sophistication” of the free market.





*Damián Ortega (1967) América Letrina, 1997, Digital print. Image courtesy the artist and kurimanzutto gallery, Mexico City*

Damián Ortega, another artist working in Mexico City, shares this Duchamp-ian impulse and encourages audience's consideration and participation. His 1997 sculpture-turned-



photograph, *America Letrina*, is a toilet reformed into the shape of the Americas to explore the arrangement of global power. “You turn the switch, and low becomes high,” Ortega says of art’s abilities, “One word and you create a paradox.”



*Trump Urinal at The Adelphi. Image courtesy Jason O'Callaghan on Instagram*

In a Dublin pub called Adelphi, the urinal-as-artwork resurfaces with the face of Donald Trump. “Mr. Trump has preached much hate in his statements,” says manager Tony McCabe, and noting the propensity for political discussion in local bars, to him “the only place Mr. Trump’s opinion mattered was on the wall of a urinal.” The innate humor of toilet talk fuses with the supposed prowess of American leadership—or in this case, the lack thereof—creating an inversion of perceived power, making the invitation to pee on the face of a potential future president doubly symbolic.

As Okón notes on “the kind of people that go to museums,” they “tend to be a fairly privileged demographic. They are the kind of people who stand in a good position to generate changes.” By opening up the cadre of humanity engaging with these scatological artworks, a golden latrine in a museum or a reviled but famous face lining the urinals of a pub can both help inspire more than a tongue-in-cheek chuckle. Inviting this unique kind of viewer participation to the masses, these artists and their works engage a wider audience while critiquing and reflecting society. By juxtaposing the

seemingly "indecent" visuals with challenging perspectives, toilet-infused art reshapes collective perceptions, reinvigorates considerations for how cultures function, and inverts prevailing notions of what is superior and what is inferior in the art world and beyond.