

Deutilization and the Duchamp Legacy

Assigned use in Bicycle Wheel Fountain and material practice

Viktor Genel | Working essay | 7 October 2026

The operation within the precedent

Marcel Duchamp is one of my inspirational figures. I understand Bicycle Wheel and Fountain as works in which an object's prescribed service is interrupted, making another encounter with its material form possible. This is the operation I call Deutilization. The term belongs to my own practice; the operation has important precedents more than a century earlier. A serious account of the connection must acknowledge those precedents without attributing my vocabulary or a complete version of my philosophy to Duchamp.

My proposition is that Deutilization and the readymade describe overlapping aspects of an artistic event. The readymade directs attention to selection, authorship, presentation, and the conditions under which an object is received as art. Deutilization directs attention to the authority of prescribed use and what happens when that authority is interrupted. An object can participate in both. Recognizing that overlap makes the Duchamp connection more precise than treating my practice as the opposite of his.

This essay examines that connection through Bicycle Wheel and Fountain, then considers business cards in MeconoMorph and traffic cones in HedgeCone. It also addresses an unresolved problem within my own philosophy: if release from one assignment produces another role, what has actually been liberated? My answer concerns a change in authority. The object need no longer be judged primarily by its success at the task for which it was manufactured or socially identified. Its history remains present, but that history no longer settles what it can become.

What Deutilization interrupts

Deutilization is a deliberate interruption of an object's prescribed service that opens inquiry into capacities subordinated to that service. A manufactured thing arrives with more than a shape. Its name, anticipated handling, position within a system, and criteria of success organize attention before anyone uses it. A traffic cone directs movement. A business card identifies a person within professional exchange. These assignments are learned and maintained, yet they can appear inseparable from the objects themselves.

The distinction between assignment and actual use is essential. A new urinal does not need to have received urine to possess an assigned function. An unused business card already belongs to a system of identification. Deutilization can therefore begin before practical

service occurs. What it acts after is assignment: the object has already been identified as something intended to serve a particular purpose.

This explains the importance of new, unused objects within my material approach. Intervening before wear or disposal makes it possible to examine a functional prescription independently of the object's failure or exhaustion. The question becomes why a serviceable thing must remain subordinate to its prescribed task, rather than how waste can be recovered. This is a methodological preference in my work, not a historical test that Duchamp's objects must satisfy.

Physical incapacity is one possible means of interruption. Reorientation, detachment, aggregation, or withholding an object from its normal system can also suspend its service. Conversely, a broken thing is not necessarily deutilized: accidental failure may leave its owner entirely committed to repair and restored use. The relevant change concerns how the object is approached and what its practical assignment is permitted to govern.

The practice retains intention. I select objects, establish conditions, and make decisions. Deutilization does not claim to escape every purpose or every human judgment. It examines the relation between a particular prescription and the material thing that prescription has made familiar. The object's continued recognizability is often indispensable: release becomes intelligible because the former service can still be remembered.

Bicycle Wheel and retained motion

Duchamp first assembled Bicycle Wheel in Paris in 1913, mounting a bicycle wheel and fork on a kitchen stool. MoMA documents the drilling of the seat and Duchamp's enjoyment of watching the wheel turn. The work preceded the explicit formulation of his readymade vocabulary; his January 1916 letter to Suzanne later situated the objects left in his studio within that category. [1] The Centre Pompidou likewise emphasizes the removal of the two objects from their primary functions and Duchamp's recollection of the assembly as a diversion. [2]

For Deutilization, the decisive feature is the separation of capacity from service. The wheel can still turn. Rotation, which contributed to transport in a bicycle, remains available when transport has been removed. The stool continues to support weight, but the mounting obstructs its familiar role as a seat. These components retain physical abilities while their combination interrupts the tasks by which they were ordinarily understood.

The work therefore makes a useful distinction visible: releasing a thing from prescribed service does not require eliminating its operation. The wheel's motion becomes perceptible under different conditions. Its bearing, circular organization, and responsiveness can be encountered without measuring their contribution to getting a rider somewhere. The stool's

supporting structure enters a new relation with that motion. This is my reading of the assembly, rather than a claim that Duchamp articulated Deutilization as a doctrine.

Bicycle Wheel also corrects an overly simple contrast between Duchamp's designation and my material intervention. His assembly required an alteration and a joining of components. A description limited to an artist pointing at an untouched commodity misses the material event in this particular work. The difference between our practices cannot rest on the proposition that Duchamp never made physical changes.

His enjoyment introduces a further difficulty. If the wheel served as a source of diversion, did it acquire another use? Certainly it acquired another relation to a person. I do not think this erases the release from transport. It demonstrates why Deutilization cannot be defined as permanent, universal uselessness. A capacity can become newly available without restoring the authority of its former task. Watching motion is a different encounter from requiring transport, even when both can be described broadly as uses.

The sequence helps identify the operation without establishing a hierarchy in which action is necessarily more liberating than theory. The assembly predates the documented category; it does not follow that it was untouched by intention or that its later classification invalidated it. The historical evidence permits a narrower, stronger claim: the interruption of service was materially present before the readymade became an explicit explanatory framework.

Fountain and useful significance

Fountain makes the connection more contentious because selection and artistic designation are central to its familiar account. In 1917 a urinal, reoriented and signed R. Mutt, was submitted to the Society of Independent Artists exhibition and rejected. SFMOMA describes its altered presentation as undermining utilitarian associations. [3] The intervention changed how the object could be encountered without requiring extensive remanufacture.

The contemporary defense already gives functional displacement a prominent place. In *The Blind Man*, no. 2, the editorial on the Richard Mutt case argued that the object's "useful significance disappeared" under its new title and point of view, producing a "new thought for that object." The Philadelphia Museum of Art reproduces this passage in its account of the controversy. [4] The disappearance of useful significance is therefore present in the work's early discourse, rather than an issue that only a later theory discovered.

I read the reoriented object as an effectively deutilized urinal. Its ceramic body and manufactured contour survive, while its installation for sanitary service is withheld. That wording names the displaced assignment without making the old category the final identity of the thing. It asks what can be encountered when the demand that this form receive urine ceases to determine its treatment.

This reading does not establish that Duchamp intended to reveal an intrinsic essence, nor does it prove that he considered deutilization more important than institutional provocation. Those are separate questions. Fountain supports an account of interrupted service; its documented history also supports an account of selection, naming, and contested artistic admission. A comprehensive interpretation must allow these events to coexist.

My disagreement with a reading centered on designation concerns the location of emphasis. The object's changed relation to practical service should remain visible alongside its changed artistic status. To say that an artist chose it explains one form of authorship. It does not fully explain what choosing, reorienting, and withholding this particular functional object allowed an observer to encounter.

Yet the sequence cannot be cleanly separated into a neutral object, a fully completed liberation, and a later act of naming. Choosing and repositioning are already interpretive decisions. With Fountain, the historical defense explicitly binds the disappearance of useful significance to a title and point of view. I can distinguish interruption from reassignment analytically without pretending that the record supplies an uncontested chronology between them.

Designation and the freedom of interpretation

In my annotations on Jerry Saltz's account of Fountain, I objected to locating the decisive event primarily in designation. I argued that releasing the urinal from its prescribed service should come first in the explanation. I also treated the title Fountain as a possible reassignment: the newly available object is immediately directed toward another interpretive destination. This is the question I bring to Duchamp's work. [5]

The argument needs a distinction between a title that proposes and a title that commands. Naming can narrow an encounter, but it can also create ambiguity or invite several readings. A viewer need not accept Fountain as an exhaustive account of the object. Calling every title an act that cancels liberation would make interpretation itself suspect and would ignore the ways language can loosen an established identity.

My concern is therefore the authority claimed by a designation. Does the new name become a prescription that the object must fulfill, or does it remain one contribution to an open encounter? A title can be an artist's reading without becoming the object's compulsory destiny. The same question applies to my own terminology. Naming a practice Deutilization should make its operation examinable, not require every viewer to endorse my metaphysics.

This also changes how I would express the disagreement with Saltz. His emphasis on the movement from manufacture toward choice and thought addresses a consequential aspect

of Fountain. My intervention asks that release from functional prescription receive comparable attention. It is an argument about an overlooked or compressed operation within the explanation, rather than proof that the whole account of designation is mistaken.

The most productive connection to Duchamp lies here. His work allows the relation between material displacement and conceptual framing to become unstable. Deutilization can investigate that instability from the side of prescribed service. It need not resolve it by announcing that Duchamp failed to understand his own work or that a later vocabulary possesses the final interpretation.

Material capacities and the claim of essence

My philosophy has often described Deutilization as revealing an object's original or true essence. This expresses a conviction: human making produces more than the practical task used to justify it. Geometry, proportion, texture, tension, and possibilities of connection can remain largely unseen while service dominates attention. I regard their emergence as discovery within the object, even when making is required to bring them into view.

A scholarly argument should distinguish this conviction from an observable claim. It is possible to examine whether an assembly depends on a card's dimensions or a cone's geometry. Demonstrating one eternal essence that precedes every use would require a different argument. Manufacture may itself have shaped these properties for practical reasons; their availability for another relation does not prove that the manufacturer secretly intended that relation.

The phrase original intention is especially vulnerable to confusion. My belief that a form contains a deeper creative possibility should not be reported as evidence about a designer's intention. A discovered capacity can be inherent in the manufactured object without having been anticipated by its maker. Its presence is material; its meaning emerges through an encounter.

Duchamp introduces a genuine philosophical difference at this point. His statements on the readymade foreground visual indifference and avoidance of judgments of taste, as summarized in MoMA's account. [6] My attention to structural capacities and the artistic potential of human-made objects cannot simply be attributed to him. Shared interruption of service does not entail a shared account of beauty, essence, or the purpose of art.

Deutilization should therefore remain open to evidence that complicates its philosophy. Some capacities are discovered, others are produced through intervention, and many belong to the relation between material and operation. Folding a card does not merely remove a label from a preexisting sculpture. It creates a physical condition in which stiffness, proportion, and contact can work differently. A credible account acknowledges both discovery and construction.

MeconoMorph and HedgeCone

In MeconoMorph, I fold business cards into repeatable units and join them into structures. Professional identification recedes as the governing task, while proportion and material behavior become active within an assembly. A card can retain printing, a name, or an association with its contributor. Deutilization does not depend on erasing those traces. It depends on their no longer exhausting the card's available relations. [7]

The resulting structures introduce a real tension: the cards now perform structural work. They are not absolutely useless. Supporting, joining, and maintaining a configuration involve purpose and material demands. If Deutilization meant the end of all function, this example would contradict it. Under the definition developed here, structural activity is compatible with interruption of prescribed service, while remaining available for critical examination as a new assignment.

My interest in proportions near the square root of three belongs to the particular card formats and configurations investigated. Business cards do not have one universal proportion, and the appearance of a useful geometric relationship must be established for the actual materials. The philosophical claim should rest on demonstrable relations, rather than assuming that a standard commercial object embodies a universally fixed or sacred ratio.

The MeconoMorph narrative supplied with this essay describes contributions, growth, dismantling, and redistribution across configurations. It also reports public interpretations involving identity, community, and sustainability. [7] Those interpretations indicate how new meanings can develop around the system. These meanings can coexist with Deutilization while directing attention toward different consequences of the material transformation.

HedgeCone offers a different material case. Its supplied account describes an assembly of new traffic cones, toilet-seat fasteners, and an exercise ball, first developed for a Boston installation in 2013. [8] Traffic control ceases to organize the cones' arrangement. Their form and mounting possibilities instead enter a geometric construction. The fasteners retain a joining capacity while being removed from their assigned fixture. This again separates an available physical operation from its prescribed service.

These examples develop Deutilization through repeated material inquiry. They do not demonstrate superiority to Duchamp, who also assembled and altered objects. Their contribution is the sustained question they ask across different manufactured forms: what can making disclose when a familiar service is denied the authority to determine the encounter?

Transitivity and the museum

David Joselit's published essay *Painting Beside Itself* provides a useful vocabulary for passage between contexts. He develops transitivity through the movement and translation of artworks within networks, including the relation between a painting's internal events and its surrounding social conditions. His account also questions the idea that circulation can be permanently arrested by collection, display, or storage. [9] This is a situated argument about painting, not a ready-made definition of Deutilization.

The connection I propose is that Deutilization intervenes within passage. It makes a particular transition examinable: an object's assigned service loses its governing position, and other relations become available. Transitivity describes a broader condition of movement and translation. Deutilization names a deliberate operation affecting one authority within that condition. This relationship leaves room for both concepts instead of making one a substitute for the other.

The museum tests the claim of liberation. Release from practical service can be followed by an obligation to remain intact, retain an authorized arrangement, or stand as an example of an established category. These obligations have reasons, including preservation and historical accountability. Nevertheless, they organize what people may do with a thing. Artistic status does not automatically mean freedom from prescription.

Deutilization cannot promise an object outside institutions, exchange, or interpretation. My own archive records works and their relationships; that act also establishes identities. The question becomes whether documentation preserves access to a material history while acknowledging other capacities, or fixes a single reading so firmly that discovery is foreclosed. Liberation is a practice that can be reconsidered, rather than a status guaranteed by admission to art.

The boundary with Preutilization

Within Arteanity, Deutilization acts after assignment has acquired authority. Preutilization, as a methodology within Somacentric Trajectilery, addresses prospective assignment before and during the formation of a mark. It suspends a demanded image or interpretive destination while permitting procedural conditions. This distinction is developed in *Before and After Assignment*. [10]

The comparison clarifies the Duchamp problem without turning him into a practitioner of my later method. *Bicycle Wheel* begins with manufactured things whose tasks are already legible. *Fountain* similarly depends on the recognition of an assigned sanitary service. Both are therefore relevant to the operation after assignment. Their relevance does not establish a historical precedent for the full Somacentric protocol.

Interpretation may follow a released object or an emerging trace. The central issue is whether a reading becomes a command over what the work must be. This gives my earlier objection to naming a more precise form. Naming need not be prohibited. Its jurisdiction can be limited: an interpretation may examine what exists without claiming sole authority over its identity or requiring the event to have served that interpretation in advance.

A lineage with an open question

Bicycle Wheel and Fountain belong within the historical field that Deutilization asks us to examine. The first interrupts service through assembly while retaining motion; the second displaces useful significance through presentation inseparable from a conceptual and institutional challenge. These works justify acknowledging Duchamp as a major precedent and inspiration. They do not justify retroactively making him the author of my terminology.

The contribution I seek is an explicit vocabulary for the authority of prescribed service and a sustained material practice that tests its interruption. The distinction from the readymade concerns analytical emphasis and the development of a method. It cannot depend on claiming that removal of function was absent from Duchamp, that he merely designated untouched objects, or that all later purpose cancels release.

The remaining question is whether a new relation lets capacities become perceptible or merely installs another exhaustive task. That question applies equally to the artist's construction, the viewer's interpretation, and the institution's preservation. Deutilization remains consequential when it keeps this relation open to scrutiny. Its connection to Duchamp gives that inquiry historical depth and a demanding precedent against which to test its own claims.

Sources and documentation

Historical descriptions, the author's interpretation, and project documentation are distinguished in the text. Bracketed numbers refer to the sources below. Web sources were consulted on 7 October 2026. The essay develops a proposed interpretation of the Duchamp connection from these sources.

[1] Nancy Lim. "Marcel Duchamp's Readymades: Celebrating the Centennial." MoMA, January 15, 2016. Includes the translated January 1916 letter to Suzanne Duchamp. [Source](#)

[2] Centre Pompidou. "Roue de bicyclette." Educational dossier on the 1913 work and 1964 replica, quoting Duchamp's interviews with Pierre Cabanne. [Source](#)

[3] SFMOMA. "Marcel Duchamp, Fountain, 1917/1964." Collection record and interpretation. [Source](#)

[4] "The Richard Mutt Case." *The Blind Man*, no. 2, May 1917, p. 5. Passage consulted as reproduced by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in "Marcel Duchamp and the Fountain Scandal," March 27, 2017. The editorial is unsigned in its original publication; the museum attributes it to Beatrice Wood. [Source](#)

[5] Viktor Genel. Annotations in Jerry Saltz on Fountain Transcript, supplied DOCX. Internal working document combining a supplied transcription and Genel's responses; recording publication details and Instagram exchange were not independently established.

[6] MoMA. "Marcel Duchamp" and "Marcel Duchamp and the Readymade." Museum interpretation and indexed text concerning visual indifference. Consulted October 7, 2026. [Source](#)

[7] Unified Narrative for MeconoMorph, supplied DOCX, and the description of business-card assembly in Viktor Genel's email to David Joselit of October 6, 2026. Used as artist/project documentation, not as independent verification of every publication or accolade reported in the synthesis.

[8] HedgeCone Rad Chapter, supplied DOCX. Used for material description and the documented project chronology; evaluative claims in the chapter are not adopted as evidence.

[9] David Joselit. "Painting Beside Itself." *OCTOBER* 130, Fall 2009, pp. 125–134, especially pp. 128 and 132–134. Full text consulted in /seconds, edition 16, September 17, 2017. [Source](#)

[10] Viktor Genel and Arteanity Digital Archive. Before and After Assignment. Supplied Theory PDF, September 2026.