

# Daimler

## Art Collection

Renate Wiehager  
Text on the exhibition

### **Bethan Huws**

#### **Choice and Precision, Coincidence and Difference**

Artistic Intervention for the Exhibition

'The Slope of a Line: 100 Years of the Readymade', Daimler Art Collection

22nd November 2016 – 12th March 2017

Daimler Contemporary Berlin

»Artist: But I thought I heard you say earlier that you even don't know what they are? Artworks that is? Artist do those? You're a hard act to follow? So in fact, the work of art is life. Is that how it works?«<sup>1</sup>

Bethan Huws (\*1961 in Bangor, Wales, UK – lives in Berlin, D) is a concept artist who synthesizes a variety of artistic media in location-specific and space-related artworks, each time renegotiating the significance of art in society. The basis for her artwork is provided by language: the spoken word, and the communicative system. The text-based works of Bethan Huws explore the borderlands between reflexive appropriation and the constitution of the artwork. On the one hand, her notes, quotations, and etymological and linguistic researches on thousands of DIN A4 pages allow her reflective efforts to be traced. On the other hand, her artistic praxis unites language artworks in the form of wall texts, book objects, neon sign texts, readings, performances, and text vitrines with readymades, sculptures, and films. This is an artist for whom the differentiated use of speech is the starting point and driving force for a dynamic quality of thought, for the interpretation and the questioning of art as a means of generating meaning. Bethan Huws grew up speaking the Welsh language, and learned English as a second language. She later worked in Paris for a number of years, also occasionally teaching in Zürich. She has been living in Berlin since 2010. For the exhibition 'The Slope of a Line: 100 Years of the Readymade' the artist has devised a location-specific project, combined with artworks of her own and with outstanding examples of artwork from the Daimler Art Collection.

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Between 1999 and 2014, Bethan Huws engaged intensively with the work of Marcel Duchamp, the concept of the readymade, and, above all, Duchamp's art object *Fountain* (1917) and its key position in art history. In 2014, she published a selection of her *Research Notes* (2007 – 2014), which comprise several thousand pages, in the form of a 523-page artist's book.<sup>2</sup> A fundamental and comprehensive artistic appropriation of Duchamp's artwork, it must be the only analytical "re-reading" endeavor of its kind in contemporary art. As a first step, Huws immersed herself, in an act of precise retracing, in the artist's own statements and the reception of the artwork as seen in Duchamp's writings, and in the most significant art-theory meta-texts. She then took this to a further level by bringing the excerpts from artist texts, concepts, pictorial material, historical facts, and interpretations into the wider context of language philosophy, linguistics, etymology, and psychoanalysis. Looking back, Bethan Huws has, through a combination of intuitive understanding and analytical penetration, asked questions that she also applies to her own artwork development, relating to subjective decisions and objective background conditions. Looking forward, she poses the question of how both the art concept and artistic praxis aspects of 'readymade' status can be made individually credible and be taken further in terms of transpersonal communication - from the standpoint both of an artist and of a recipient.<sup>3</sup>

The exhibition 'The Slope of a Line: 100 Years of the Readymade' – with works from the Daimler Art Collection and conceived in collaboration with Bethan Huws – will run through late 2016 and early 2017, thereby corresponding to the 'double' birthday of the ready-made, both as a concept and as an artistic praxis. In January 1916, Marcel Duchamp, who had moved from Paris to New York the previous year, wrote a letter to his sister Suzanne concerning the disposal of his Paris apartment, in which he mentions the concept of the readymade for the first time. Marcel Duchamp explains to his sister the status of the things that he left behind: "Now, if you have been up to my place, you will have seen, in the studio, a *bicycle* wheel and a *bottle rack*. I bought this as a ready-made sculpture. And I have a plan concerning this so-called bottle rack. Listen to this: here, in N.Y., I have bought various objects in the same taste and I treat them as 'readymades.' You know enough English to understand the meaning of 'readymade' that I give these objects. I sign them and I think of an inscription for them in English. I'll give you a few examples. I have, for example, a large snow shovel on which I have inscribed at the bottom: *In advance of the broken arm*, French translation: *En avance du bras casé*. Don't tear your hair out trying to understand this in the Romantic or Impressionistic or Cubist sense—it has nothing to do with all that. Another "readymade" is called: *Emergency in favor of twice*, possible French translation: *Danger \ Crise \ en faveur de 2 fois*. This long preamble just to say: take the bottle rack for yourself. I'm making it a "Readymade," remotely. You are to inscribe it at the bottom and on the inside

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of the bottom circle, in small letters painted with a brush in oil, silver white color, with an inscription which I will give you herewith, and then sign it, in the same handwriting as follows: [after] Marcel Duchamp.”<sup>4</sup> Duchamp’s explicit explanation failed to prevent both the bottle rack and the bicycle wheel from being disposed of as rubbish.

In April 2016, the catalogue for the group exhibition ‘Exhibition of Modern Art’ at New York’s Bourgeois Gallery had listed the artworks contributed by Marcel Duchamp as ‘Two Ready-mades’.<sup>5</sup> A year later, in 1917, the jury of the New York art event ‘Salon des artistes indépendents’, which included Marcel Duchamp, decided not to admit to the exhibition a urinal signed ‘R. Mutt 1917’, which had been submitted as a sculpture. Duchamp’s controversial object ‘Fountain’ reappeared briefly at the Alfred Stieglitz gallery, where it was photographed by the proprietor, before vanishing for more than two decades. In 1965, Duchamp recalled the complete disinterest of the contemporary public in his readymade concept: “Until just a few years ago, I did not even exhibit them, with the exception of a single exhibit [in the Bourgeois Gallery] in New York in 1916. I hung three of them on a clothes rack at the entrance, and no-one noticed them ... which was a lot of fun.”<sup>6</sup> In 1941, Duchamp (...) disseminates his legendary early readymades in the form of miniature reproductions in his *Boite-en-valise* suitcase exhibit. Circa 1950, Duchamp approved (there is a 1959 second version, 1953 unverified version and the third version in 1963) replicas-readymades based on Stieglitz’ photo. In 1964, Milan gallerist Arturo Schwarz marketed ‘Fountain’ in the form of an elaborately produced multiple.

### **On the genesis of Bethan Huws’ artwork**

The early work of Bethan Huws, which was created in the late 1980s in a Young British Artists context, began with the formulation of questions concerning her own – intellectual – position as an artist via institution-critical spatial interventions involving the removal, exposure, transference and duplication of flooring in the academy /gallery /museum concept. This led to the creation of experience and thought spaces, with the aim of opening up places of perception and self-reflection for the viewer. Beginning in 1991, and continuing for around ten years, Bethan Huws translated her thorough researches on the relationship of body, language, art, and society into pure text artworks, materializing the artworks’ connection with concrete spaces, locations, and cultural situations in various different ways: handwritten texts on the wall, DIN A 4 pages laid out on the walls, temporary text images for natural spaces, books, a theatre piece, readings, performances, in-situ word sculptures, film, and language objects.

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For around 15 years now, Bethan Huws has been investigating the foundation of art provided by the indissoluble connection of spirit and body, of intellectual penetration and social interaction - through her engagement with the tradition of the readymade and the work of Marcel Duchamp. She conducts her researches in parallel in different areas of knowledge: philosophy and linguistics, poetry and art history, film history, music, and spiritual/religious traditions. In the work of Bethan Huws, analytical constructions and artistic praxis are used to open up the widest imaginable horizon for the concept of the readymade: translation of a historical artwork (Duchamp's painting *Nu descendant un escalier*) into a 'readymade' language image, objects with various cultural functions in the form of thought images, a Bulgarian women's choir as a "readymade equivalent", definings of a linguistics textbook as a graphic print edition, and the reordering of museum collections as readymades, as opposed to art theory classifications - thereby creating new forms of reading.

If one is to understand the theme of the readymade in Huws' work, one must understand that her intention is not to detach a prefabricated everyday object from its environment and translate it into the context of art, as was the case with the original understanding of the readymade. Rather, she is concerned with the transfer of contextual units, with a dislocation of cultural and historical contexts in order to constantly provoke new readings of the same sense items. The precondition for this kind of translation is provided by the structural analysis of phenomena from different contexts: for instance, by recognizing the structure and the system that lies behind *Bottle Rack*, and thereby behind Marcel Duchamp's concept of the readymade, Bethan Huws can find this basic structure in phenomena from other contexts. In 2015, Bethan Huws created a construction that was highly relevant in this sense for the Kunsthalle Karlsruhe: in the emptiness of the great entrance area, the visitor is confronted with *Le porte-bouteilles, 2008* a Philippine shell (*Murex pecten* also called *venus comb murex*) with rising spiral-form pointed spines, the size of the palm of the hand and placed on a mdf-medium pedestal. This piece of nature served as a prelude, referencing the conclusion of the exhibition: Huws' large-scale installation *Forest, 2008-09* consisting of 88 bottle racks.<sup>7</sup> The title of the artwork refers the store-bought objects back to the context of nature, with every bottle rack metaphorically readable as a tree. "All works of art are linguistic by nature. Not one of them would exist on Earth without language. All works of art are linguistic constructions."<sup>8</sup>

The artist reads the horizontally positioned urinal entitled *Fountain* - Marcel Duchamp's "readymade masterpiece" (B.H.) - as an act and as a language game: "Fountain is definitely a nude: the man - or at least this small but important part of him - is, and what could be more popular than a toilet? [...] When I first encountered *Fountain* in the flesh, so to speak, I didn't recognize it as a work of art; I simply recognized a urinal on a plinth, and so what? It was only

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later, with some additional work on my own behalf – when I finally put the word ‘fountain’ (realization) with the thing ‘urinal’ (recognition) – that the big wheel started to turn.”<sup>9</sup> Bethan Huws takes the title of the artwork at its word. To her, *Fountain* is the source, the origin and ever-new, inexhaustible starting point for contemplation of artistic practice and its ethical anchoring.

The basis of Bethan Huws’ exhibition ‘The Lake Writing’ at the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) London in 1991 was provided by the phenomenological description of a rambling trip around a mountain lake, which was spoken, unfiltered, into a dictation device, transferred to a handwritten manuscript on DIN A 4 pages, and hung in the otherwise empty museum spaces. ‘Unfiltered’, in this case, refers to the fact that the artist converts her observations into language in an exceptionally precise and concrete manner, but without falling into an analytical or scientific meta-language.<sup>10</sup> The moment of heightened perception is expressed in an anti-subjective, anti-impressionistic language image, which places itself outside of time, history, and memory, thereby also subtly expressing the unbridgeable alienation between self and world / nature. Here, the verbalizing and noting down in writing of a chain of visual impressions functions like a readymade, transferring, as it were, a sensory/intellectual act out of the natural space and into the art space.

For her exhibition ‘Haus Esters’, 1993, Bethan Huws proclaimed the whole architectonic structure of that residence, built by Mies van der Rohe, to be a ‘readymade’: an ‘already completed’ artwork. She merely added an openly-structured text object that visitors can carry with them as they walk through the empty rooms.

In the same year for an Artangel project, Bethan Huws invited a Bulgarian women’s choir for the performance/film project *Singing to the Sea*. On the coast of Northumberland, they sung traditional folk songs evoking forests and mountains, shepherds and young maidens of their Bulgarian homeland. Huws herself has described the performance as a ‘readymade equivalent’<sup>11</sup> to her early flooring artworks – if the factor of translation is of fundamental importance to artistic praxis in general, then one could say that in this case she has translated a centuries-old tradition of language and music, organically developed through cultural processes, from one cultural space into another.

The concept of quoting (in handwriting), collaging, montaging, erasing, recomposing etc. expressions, quotations, definitions and her own reflections provides the basis for Bethan Huws’ textual work *Origin and-Source, 1993-June 1995* accumulated over three years, between 1993 and 1996. She broke off the work, leaving it uncompleted, in order to collate around 1,300 pages into six volumes. Within these pages, arranged in a consistently anti-

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linear manner, she describes the concepts fundamental to her work – language / writing / material / medium / form / difference / system / synthesis / origin / identity etc. – which constantly lead us from objective recognition back to the thought processes and language actions of a concrete person: “An artwork is made of one thing – a person – it becomes the job of an artist to know what a person is.”<sup>12</sup> Here, the artist engages with the ‘system of language’: she reflects the conditionality of artistic practice in the medium of language. In the text work *Origin and Source*, similarly, Bethan Huws consistently takes the thoughts behind Marcel Duchamp’s concept of the readymade as formulated in 1916 a step further: whereas Duchamp shifts everyday objects into the concept of art in order to reveal differences of meaning, Huws remains within the context of art, taking artistic praxis itself – her own, and those of artists who are kindred spirits – as the starting point, and transferring the factor of self-referentiality to the next level. In other words: artistic praxis can be explicitly personal and individual, whilst simultaneously being capable of being communicated and read transpersonally. “An artwork can be anything we want it to be / our own vision – our own notion – our own dream – our wish – what we want – desire – hope for the future / as long as we can find others that have a similar wish.”<sup>13</sup> According to Bethan Huws, serious artistic praxis always incorporates ethical and social impulses.

Duchamp’s object, *Fountain*, which was first exhibited in 1917, has a central significance in *Origin and Source* (1993-June 1995), as the source of a qualitatively new claim on the relationship of art and ethics. Bethan Huws continues to devote herself to new aspects of this today. She succinctly describes the context shifting and functional devaluing of the urinal elevated to an artistic pedestal by Duchamp: “2 Major Events / 1 Displacement / 2 Turning, (making) reflection, Movement. The point of origin of an earthquake within the crust of the Earth. Also known as the seismic focus.”<sup>14</sup> The act of thought, the disciplined, precise thinking through of something as the substance of the artwork expresses a correspondence of intellect and world, of inside and outside. From 1999 to 2014, Bethan Huws devoted herself increasingly to the work of Duchamp and the concept of the readymade. Her efforts – an artistic praxis simultaneously ‘applied’ and ‘reflecting’ – resulted in a variety of different artwork groups: the language objects on aluminum/rubber panels, temporary language artworks for exhibition contexts, films, sculptures involving everyday objects, puzzles, and the *Research Notes*, comprising several thousand pages (2007 – 2014).<sup>15</sup>

In its entirety, the oeuvre of Bethan Huws is permeated by antonymic paradigms: inside – outside / city - nature / static – fluid / bounded – unbounded / art – landscape / individual signature – normatized spaces. Her thinking is dedicated to the dialectic of the subject/individual versus the cultural public, of the hermetic versus openness to the world. Her processually conceived oeuvre expresses itself in constructions, “trying out a

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construction that creates a single entity combining a real piece of the world, the 'I', and the question as to the possibilities of art." <sup>16</sup>

"Yes, the word reason, foundation, leads us all to reason, to our final destination, all those fundamental facts on ground level, on the flats, on Earth. The foundation is the last and final step before we reach the ground or the 'rock bottom' of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the end. When there's nothing left to say but to think. And the ground: what makes us depressed is the human. The way some, not all of us, think or function. The 'why'? or the 'how come'? When something doesn't have a good solid ground or base, that is, its foundation at its very beginning, the whole dammed house (construction, architecture) is liable to collapse in the end. There's a joke in *ION ON* this time about the curators' not the artists' constructions: 'Trouble is, their shacks are pretty shaky – a bit like jelly'." <sup>17</sup>

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1 “The Work’ of Art is Life”, quoted in: Bethan Huws, ION ON. A critical comedy. 45 scenes, 2001-2003, theater piece and film, scene 2, see: Bethan Huws, Selected Textual Works 1991-2003, exhibition catalogue Bethan Huws – Foyer, hrsg. v. Dieter Association Paris und Kunsthalle Düsseldorf 2003, S. 156.

2 Dieter Association Paris, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne (ed.): Bethan Huws, Research Notes, Artist’s book with 523 facsimile A4 notes on Marcel Duchamp, Editor Dieter Association Paris, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne 2014.

3 See also the interview in: Veit Görner, Kristin Schrader, Ariane Beyn (ed.), Bethan Huws, Il est comme un saint dans sa niche: il ne bouge pas, exhibition cataloguee kestnergesellschaft Hannover, German Academic Exchange Service Berlin Artists-in-Residence Program, Dieter Association Paris, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne, 2010.

4 [http://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2016/01/15/marcel-duchamps-readymades-celebrating-the-centennial/](http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2016/01/15/marcel-duchamps-readymades-celebrating-the-centennial/). See also: Dieter Daniels, Duchamp und die anderen. Der Modellfall einer künstlerischen Wirkungsgeschichte in der Moderne, Köln, DuMont Buchverlag, 1992, S. 168 f. The letter was part of the estate of Alice Buckles-Brown and has been donated following an initiative by Francis Naumann to the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., Crotti Papers.

5 Cf. Daniels, as with note 4, p. 172 f. [http://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2016/01/15/marcel-duchamps-readymades-celebrating-the-centennial/](http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2016/01/15/marcel-duchamps-readymades-celebrating-the-centennial/)

6 Marcel Duchamp: Ready Made, ed. Serge Stauffer (Zürich 1973, p.52). Quoted from Christoph Asendorf, Batteries of Life;

[https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=jZ2W926fIH0C&dq=Until+just+a+few+years+ago,+I+did+not+even+exhibit+them&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=jZ2W926fIH0C&dq=Until+just+a+few+years+ago,+I+did+not+even+exhibit+them&source=gbs_navlinks_s)

7 Bethan Huws, Forest, exhibition catalogue Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, Dieter Association Paris, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne 2015.

8 Julian Heynen, Bethan Huws, Odysse: Auf dem Grund des Gehirns befindet sich ein Brunnen, in: exhibition catalogue Bethan Huws, Bonnefantenmuseum Maastricht, Kunstverein St. Gallen Kunstmuseum, Cologne, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König 2007, p. 97.

9 Huws 2010, as with note 3, pp. 48, 45.)

10 On this, cf.: Emma Dexter, The Lake Piece: To See Everything for the First Time, in: Huws 2003, exhibition catalogue, as with note 1, p. 25.

11 Cf. Huws 2003, as with note 1, p. 6.

12 Huws 2003, as with note 1, p. 53. Cf. Hans-Rudolf Reust, To Start by Writing – Acts of thinking in the Gerund, in Huws 2003, as with note 1, p. 66 ff.

13 Huws 2003, as with note 1, p. 83. Quoted from the textual work Hiraeth.

14 Huws 2003, as with note 1, p. 73.

<sup>15</sup> See Bethan Huws, Research Notes, 2014, and Hans Rudolf Reust, Lesarten des Lesens / Ways of Reading. Re-reading BethanHuws. Reading Duchamp. Research Notes 2007-2014, Ed. Dieter Association Paris, Kökn (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König) 2014.

16 Julian Heynen, Ich will versuchen, mich an die Zeichnungen zu erinnern, in exhibition catalogue Bethan Huws – Watercolours, Kaiser Wilhelm Museum Krefeld, 1998, p. 13.

17 Bethan Huws, in: Huws 2007, as with note 8, p. 100.

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