

## Design/Arts/Culture

Vol 2 (2021)

Design | Arts | Culture —Open theme—



### THE SECOND LIFE OF EVERYDAY OBJECTS IN BARRY FELDMAN'S WORK

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doi: [10.12681/dac.27856](https://doi.org/10.12681/dac.27856)

#### To cite this article:

Kertemelidou, P., & Warner, R. (2022). THE SECOND LIFE OF EVERYDAY OBJECTS IN BARRY FELDMAN'S WORK. *Design/Arts/Culture*, 2. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dac.27856>



# ARTICLES





# THE SECOND LIFE OF EVERYDAY OBJECTS IN BARRY FELDMAN'S WORK

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## **ABSTRACT**

The following text makes special reference to the transfer of common industrial objects from the category of utility or even waste, to autonomous work of art. The concept and image of the industrial object as garbage, by-product or as a thing without value, has occupied the artists of Cubism, Dada, Pop Art, Fluxus and Conceptual Art more recently (Cornell, Schwitters, Duchamp, Arman, Rauschenberg, Oldenburg, among many others). Barry Feldman, a New York artist and art historian, discovered through the permanent collection of MoMA avant-garde art and when he moved to Greece, his New York experience remained alive for his work. Every industrial object finds its place in some of his three-dimensional compositions which he categorizes as boxes, portables, portholes and rockets. In wooden boxes, salvaged or made by him anew, the worthless objects of our world are recycled and return to their autonomous existence.



## 1. THE EVERYDAY INDUSTRIAL OBJECT IN AVANT-GARDE ART

"Art" is an abstract term. Works of art contain art as a property, and this property distinguishes them from other human works. It is not enough, as Martin Warnke writes, for the creator of such a work to define himself as an artist and his product as art, but a number of competent stakeholders, or institutions, must agree on that as well. Gombrich (1994: 15) begins his book *The Chronicle of Art* with the phrase "In fact art does not exist. There are only artists". Goodman (2006: 378-379) asks the question "When is an object a work of art?" and replies that an object becomes a work of art because it functions as a symbol. Respectively, John Carey in his book *What Good Are the Arts?* (2006) concludes that "anything can be a work of art." "What makes it a work of art is that one considers it a work of art."

In the attempt of artists, after cubism, to unify art with life and to challenge the aesthetic autonomy of the work of art, Marcel Duchamp responded by creating a new kind of art where objects of everyday use were presented as they are, not as part of a composition on canvas, and selected not as aesthetic objects but as indifferent, suggesting that they do not need to have specific properties or characteristics to be considered works of art, as long as they are selected by the artist to be considered as such. In his readymades, Duchamp extracted various humble, industrial objects of everyday use, objects that had no artistic value from their functional and commercial context, and presented them as works of art, giving them a conceptual dimension. His first works *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) and *Bottle Rack* (1914), reminiscent of abstract art, Duchamp rendered them as useful, simple commodities, forcing us to consider the relationship between utility value, exchange value and aesthetics. At the same time, he considered naming, that is, attributing a name to an art object, as equivalent to creating art. The most famous of his readymades is undoubtedly the *Fountain* (1917), a urinal basin which he chose, placing it so that its useful meaning disappears under the new title and the new point of view, thus creating a new thought (B. Wood, *Blind Man Magazine*, op. Cit. In Foster et al. 2009: 129).

Duchamp, along with Picabia and Man

Ray, joined Dadaism in 1918, criticizing Cubism for reinforcing the notion of art as a producer of valuables, which in turn became part of the established system of values that had struggled to change from the beginning. For Dada, true art is anti-art; it does not want to create works of art, but to "express" itself through chain interventions, arbitrary, unpredictable, irrational, and paradoxical. The Dada artist proposes actions aimed at turning society against its own methods by using things it values in an irrational and contradictory way (Argan, 1975: 393). Duchamp's readymades are inspired by the principles of Dada, although in art history their affinity with surrealism has recorded them in as early examples of surreal objects.

Surrealists turned their attention to the common object when surrealism began to transform from a literary movement to a visual one and to focus on material representation instead of text. The surreal object was the result of Duchamp's readymade just as the surreal image was the result of Dada's collage (Foster et al. 2009: 251). Two works by Man Ray, *The Enigma* by Isidore Dickas (1920) and *The Gift* (1921), as well as André Breton's *Poème-Objet* (1936), explicitly characterize this transition. The classification of objects by surrealists began with the subjective, dreamy desire to find objects revealing subconscious processes that could incorporate the subject into the object. The main categories are *objets rêvé* (dream objects), *objets trouvés* and "normal" surreal objects. Duchamp's readymades, although most belong to the category of *objets trouvés*, are perhaps considered as a category in themselves (Lehmann, 2007: 25-37). Surreal objects were not meant as original constructions constituting a complete composition but as a combination of existing objects and material elements. The autonomy of the artwork does not lie in its removal from the industrial production process but instead in its attachment to it and in a subversive reversal through the confrontation of readymade elements (Lehmann, 2007: 35).

The surrealist assemblage of mundane objects was perhaps expressed most effectively in the work of Joseph Cornell. He started to make collages when he encountered surrealism in the early 1930s, inspired by Max Ernst's collaged novel *La Femme 100 Têtes* that introduced him

to the idea that art was not necessarily a matter of applying paint to canvas, but could also be made from real objects, estrangely combined. He also started to assemble what he called dossiers on his favourite subjects, categorizing them into topics such as Advertisements, Butterflies, Clouds, Fairies, Figureheads, Food, Insects, History, Planets etc. Soon afterwards he started creating his wooden shallow boxes, readymade cases at first, which he moved to build by himself later on. They came out in series characterized by their dream-like imagery and interest in childhood memories, like the Medici Slot Machine, melancholy marvels in which composed princesses and slouching princes gaze sorrowfully from simulacra of vending machines, the Aviary series, lithographs of parrots cut from books and perched in cages are decorated with watch-faces or arranged as if for a shooting gallery or the Hotels and Observatories, celestial lodging places for travelers passing between worlds.

The assemblage of common objects was also in the interest of another great Dada artist, a prominent figure of the 20s avant-garde, Kurt Schwitters. He started collecting items that had been found by chance and had caught his attention for some reason: buttons, strings, corks, tram tickets, letters. He placed them on a kind of pillar, a totem which he named *Merzbau*, an environment for his personal use, a nest, a grotto, a protected space, a complete art environment: a *gesamtkunstwerk*. It was the first form of installation, a work constantly evolving as new objects were added forming cavities, many of which were dedicated to his favorite artists (Arp, Gabo, Lissitzky, Malévich, Mies, van Doesburg and Richter) including even personal objects and anything related to the lives of these persons - sometimes objects stolen from them - even tufts of hair (Hans Richter, 1965: 152). In the 1950s, the fascination with the elements of street life, store windows, graffiti, advertisements, trash, and an awareness of the sculptural possibilities of these objects led to a shift in Pop-art artist Claes Oldenburg's interest from painting to sculpture. He created *The Store* (1960-61), a collection of painted plaster copies of food, clothing, jewelry and other items, and the following year in an actual store he rented, a series of happenings - experimental presentations involving sound, movement, objects, and people.

Like other Pop-art artists, he chose as his subjects the banal products of consumer life, especially objects with close human associations, such as bathtubs, typewriters, light switches, and electric fans. In addition, his use of soft, yielding vinyl gave the objects human, often sexual, overtones (as in *Giant Toothpaste Tube* [1964]). *The Store* was a significant forerunner of the concerns of a loose confederation of artists forming the Fluxus movement, working in performance, painting, sculpture, poetry, experimental music, and even correspondence art (art sent through the postal service). Fluxus was the first cultural plan of the post-war period that acknowledged that the collective attempts of identity constructions and the social relations are in adversely affected, mainly and globally, by the manufactured objects of mass consumption. And if Duchamp had foreseen in the mid 60s that in the near future the whole galaxy of objects would be considered as an inexhaustible source for readymades, it was the Fluxus movement that shifted this paradigm to an aesthetic of a global performance. With Fluxus, the systematic destabilization of visual objects launched by the readymades, would find its correspondences in the theatre. Fluxus art involved the viewer, relying on the element of chance to shape the ultimate outcome of the piece. The use of chance was also employed by Dada, Duchamp, and other performance art of the time, such as *Happenings*. Fluxus artists were also heavily influenced by the ideas of John Cage, who believed that one should embark on a piece without having a conception of the eventual end. It was the process of creating that was important, not the finished product. Fluxus was one of the few art movements to use humor consistently and extensively. Despite their playful attitude, Fluxus artists were serious about their desire to change the balance of power in the art world. Their irreverence for "high art" had an impact on the perceived authority of the museum to determine what, and who, constituted "art." (Foster et al. 2009: 458).

In 1960 the art critic Pierre Restany (1989) aptly analyzed in the manifesto of the *Nouveaux Réalistes* movement in Europe the social development of this period and its impact on art (Klein, Arman, Cesar, Spoerri, Tinguely, Christo and many others, among them many Greek artists living in Paris at the time). The *Nouveaux*

Réalistes use "materials" of the city such as machines, plastics, paper posters and all kinds of industrial objects. Influenced by Dada and Duchamp, they turn these into original and unique objects that Restany called *objet-plus*. Additionally, the integration of these objects in art expresses the general tendency to question the epoch, the consumer way of life, the socio-political dimension of art. Art starts from the beginning and everything can be art.

## 2. THE EVERYDAY INDUSTRIAL OBJECT IN BARRY FELDMAN'S WORK

Barry Feldman was born in New York City and studied Art History at Swarthmore College. As a teenager he took frequent advantage of his parents' membership at the Museum of Modern Art. Soon MoMA became a kind of second home, where he discovered the permanent collection in detail, while also attending many of MoMA's groundbreaking shows during the course of the 1960s (Greenberger, 2019). These included the 1960 MoMA Garden installation, "Homage to New York", by Swiss sculptor and kinetic artist Jean Tinguely, but especially the historic 1961 exhibition "The Art of Assemblage" (MoMA, 1961 & Seitz, 1961), bringing together some 140 artists and featuring, among other elements, 35 collages by Kurt Schwitters; 13 works of Marcel Duchamp; and major exposure for Joseph Cornell's constructed boxes. Cornell's bi-

ographer, Deborah Solomon, called the exhibition "a great salute to the scavenging instinct" (Solomon, 1997: 353).

The university Feldman attended was close to Philadelphia, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art became a fertile place for his artistic sense to flourish, and for his grasp of the great European and American visual artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to develop. Part of his immersion included repeated visits to the museum's permanent collection of Marcel Duchamp's drawings, paintings, prints and other works on paper, and of course the Duchamp readymades that are headliners in the museum's holdings: *Comb*, *Fountain*, *With Hidden Noise* and *Why not Sneeze*, *Rose Sélavy*?

Meanwhile, for a livelihood to help support his studies, he patrolled streets and neighborhoods for discarded items he could sell at weekly flea markets, while also accumulating pieces to use in his own painting and constructions. Feldman cites a particular moment in 1967 or 1968: "There it was on the street. A small wooden box, one end of which was filled with hard rubber bicycle pedals, neatly arranged, end out, with the several round mounting holes forming a distinct geometric pattern accentuating the lozenge shape of the pedal ends themselves. It was quite literally an *objet trouvé* with an intrinsic value on an entirely other scale from its original function. This was something different – the sheer beauty of the thing itself, the combination of the box and its contents. It was the very next day that, having picked up a few other small throwaways that would normally



Figure 1, 2: *Fountain* (1917), *Why not Sneeze*, *Rose Sélavy*? (1921) (wikipedia.org)



have been passed over as uselessly non-saleable, I removed a few of the pedals from the box and inserted a small plaster knick-knack bust into that empty space. In turn, I added a small, broken, plastic wedding cake bride and groom in formal attire, no doubt having served its original purpose and being dutifully disposed of, to face the bust. A discarded shaving brush acted as the final creative touch, not only balancing the composition as a whole but also adding an associative depth and air of mystery to what might be aptly described as a Cornell-like box” (2020, interview with Barry Feldman). It was a revelation for Feldman and the beginning of his passion for creating box constructions in tandem to his painting.

We can compare this account with the account of how Joseph Cornell’s idea of creating box construction occurred to him: “It came to him on one of his walks through Manhattan. Passing an antique shop, he noticed a pile of compasses in the window. ‘I thought, everything can be used in a lifetime, can’t it, and went on walking,’ Cornell told David Bourdon of *Life* magazine in 1967. ‘I’d scarcely gone two blocks when I came on another shop window full of boxes, all different kinds.... Halfway home on the train that night, I thought again of the compasses and the boxes. It occurred to me to put the two together.” (Solomon, 1997: 109-110) For Feldman, Cornell’s epiphany means that “One plus one equals two is mathematics; one plus one equals three is art.”

The artist arrived in Greece in 1989 and settled in Thessaloniki. At first, he lived on the large agricultural campus of the American Farm School outside the city. This proved to be a treasure trove of dis-

carded machine parts, farm equipment, tools, building and packing materials – of all descriptions – that were destined to take their places in his constructions. The cornucopia of these discarded objects and materials was a prelude to the artist’s discovery of the daily bounty that awaited him on the streets of Thessaloniki. In 2010 he moved to a studio space at the commercial heart of the city and began to collect from the abundance of his downtown environment. While continuing to make landscape and still life paintings, his box building grew at a rapid pace. The move to town seemed to engender a more refined and curated sense of what objects to work with and how to put them into play. In addition to scores of individual, stand-alone boxes, he created series called Portholes; Rockets; and The Portables.

## 2.1 THE PORTHOLES

Finding a mass of cast-off circular ceiling light fixtures, he selected their stainless-steel rims whose shape and material reminded him of a ship’s portholes. He built a series of 24 boxes to a uniform size (26 x 24 x 13 cm) made of pine or ash wood from disused boards, flooring, shelving and furniture, and populated them with small objects of vinyl, plastic, glass, wire, metal, wood, etc. These Porthole boxes also made the artist think of 1950s era television sets. Through portholes, or early TV screens, he invited the viewer “to eavesdrop on the shipboard intrigues, domestic dramas, and moments of calm in the lives of his beloved objects.” (Feldman, 2021)



Figure 3, 4: Porthole #19, 26 x 24 x 13 cm, Porthole #20, 26 x 24 x 13 cm

## 2.2 THE ROCKETS

These objects consist of ten swim floats made of white industrial plastic, each with a clear acrylic compartment in the center for the user to gaze at the sea floor while swimming, and which provided a convenient container for housing choice

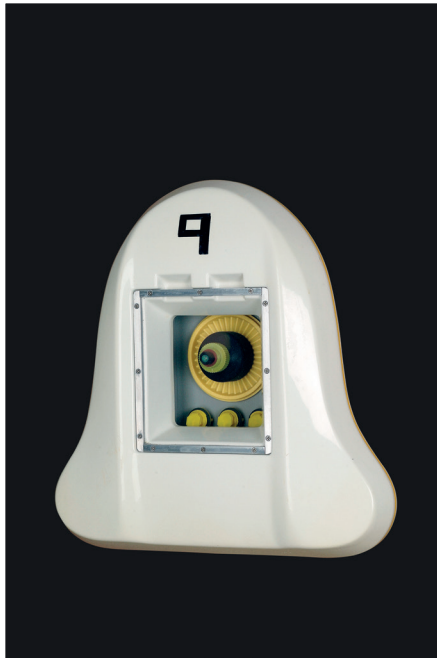


Figure 5: Rocket #9, 51 x 49 x 13 cm gure

small objects. They reminded him of space capsules launched into outer space, so he christened the series "Rockets".

## 2.3 THE PORTABLES

The Portables Series is Barry Feldman's salute to (and sometimes parody of) the painters and sculptors who are makers



Figure 6: Lichtenstein Portable: A brush is a brush is a brush, 63 x 54 x 12 cm

and shakers of the 20th and early 21st century European and American art world. The containers, as with those for the Portholes, are built to a uniform size in almost every case (63 x 54 x 12 cm) of disused pieces of pine or ash wood. The handles that make these boxes portable consist of a section of a metal rod designed for clothing closets. The materials for the contents of each box give specific reference to each artist. For the Pollock Portable, multicolored electric wire is used to create the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock anew. Graded shades of rusted metal recreate a Mark Rothko painting. Two discarded mallets – one wooden, one hard rubber – add up to a Brancusi sculpture. In the Lichtenstein Portable, a piece of Pirelli rubber flooring gives us the Ben-Day dots we know make a Roy Lichtenstein painting.



Figure 7: Duchamp Portable: Checkmate, 63 x 54 x 12 cm

In the Duchamp Portable, we have the ink roller that references Duchamp's involvement with printmaking. The box's background is a panel of shattered glass, evoking Duchamp's sculpture *The Large Glass* in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. And the floor of the box is a chessboard, echoing Duchamp's (unfulfilled) vow to give up the life of an artist and instead play chess.

In an interview, Feldman sketched out

his approach to working with abandoned objects and materials: "What I make are constructions. I like things, very often broken and discarded things, which frequently figure in my still life paintings. Still life, nature morte are unfortunate terms. I like to think of my still life painting as 'things'. Often enough, I find myself admiring and holding onto some silly little something that has no possibility of adding anything structural to a possible painting, but I love it anyway, even more, as it is completely non-useful. And then I use it- in one of my constructions! To answer your question, I am constantly collecting all these things, all this garbage, and I have a separate studio for them. All the time I am painting I am also collecting, almost always by chance, these things and bits of things and it finally reaches the point where I can hardly squeeze into my construction studio, no less work there. That's when I know it is time to build – to use up some of the stuff and move the constructions to another space – one of my many all-important storerooms. I work like this, slowly making room, for several weeks, and then I stop and return to painting. To use an analogy, I like to think painting is the air in which I live, and construction is the wonderful sea into which I take very refreshing dives." (Gogades, 2002).

### 3. THE BOXES

For the most part, Feldman's boxes present themselves as one-off individual pieces, though there are many that come in a unifying series (as we have seen with the Portholes and the Portables). One-off pieces are just that, usually inspired by a specific object that is then placed in an

environment along with other objects of various forms, colors and textures and, when recognizable, of widely differing usage and former lifetimes. There is usually a playful use of juxtaposition of the objects; but there is always an overriding concern for the staging and composition in search of an inherent harmony, or aiming at a certain frisson – which is another kind of dynamic of the ensemble, similar to the use of enjambment in a line of poetry. The artist often describes his boxes as small theater sets, or as poems with objects in the place of words.

When the box constructions come in series, these series suggest themselves fundamentally from the availability of same-sized containers. In the case of the Small Box Series (27 x 35 x 18 cm), the containers are small wooden crates from a local wine shop that, once the wine bottles are removed, are passed along to the artist. Together with the creative challenge of what goes into them, there is the engineering aspect of preparing the boxes for their new incarnation, structurally as well and visually.

The Large Box Series (80 x 66 x 22 cm) began by chance and coincidence. One of the original fabric stores in the artist's neighborhood went out of business and several walls' worth of long, wide, solid pine shelving was left behind for discard. Coincidentally, the artist was given a small circular table saw by a friend who no longer found it useful. Up to this point, all cutting for box construction had been done with a hand saw. Sizing these massive pine boards into useful dimensions would have been daunting. With the table saw, it was do-able. There have been large individual boxes throughout



Figure 8, 9: First Box, 20 x 24 x 10 cm, Abacus, 42 x 39 x 15 cm





Figure 10: Fall of Ikarus, 80 x 66 x 22 cm,

the years, but for the first time, there is a series of them as such. One obvious advantage of this size is that larger pieces of found objects can be utilized, and there is a more expansive space within the box to play with them. There is no one idea binding them together as a series, no simple variations on a theme, though the 'weight' of their size does act that way. The series ranges in topics (officially titled or not), from one with the focal point on a soldier's rucksack that is dedicated to Ford Maddox Ford's wrenching tetralogy of novels about the First World War, *Parade's End*; to another which is addressed to the ignominious Fall of Ikarus, to the tongue-in-cheek Celebration of a Fictional Epic Starting with the Letter E.

Much of the artist's work over the years, including the recent Large Box Series, evokes a palpable kinship, or empathy, with the Cornell idiom of narrative. One of Feldman's early boxes with brass faucet, dominos, and two small metal figures symbolizing Joseph Cornell and his younger brother whom he took care of his whole life, is titled *The Heavens Wept for Joseph*.

The Small Box Series reaches further back in time, to Duchamp's revolution-

ary readymades, focusing on a single object. The first in the series of twelve is an oddly shaped fiberglass fragment from a broken planter found across the street from the artist's studio. Says Feldman, "in color, shape and texture, what I discovered is uniquely beautiful and elicits profound feelings of joy, wonder and mystery. A 'voila' moment, as with a Duchampian bottlerack". He cites another case, when a locksmith came to replace the lock on the door to his studio. Having finished, the locksmith put the broken mechanism he had removed into the artist's hands for him to discard. "I couldn't do that," Feldman explains. "The mechanism plays a solo role in one of my new small boxes. And, like many things in my constructions, it's kinetic – the mechanism moves!"

Other small boxes house a piece of rope, with different gauges knotted together; a curved section of a sheet-metal drainpipe with a lovely spotting of rust; an old-fashioned electrical mains switch removed from its marble insulation mounting; a fishing reel. The objects are presented virtually on their own as worthy of both wonder and contemplation.



Figure 11: Celebration of a Fictional Epic Starting with the Letter E, 80 x 66 x 22 cm



Figure 12: The Heavens Wept for Joseph, 34 x 24 x 11 cm



Figure 13, 14: Box with Fragment, 27 x 35 x 18 cm, Box with Lock, 27 x 35 x 18 cm

#### 4. CONCLUSION

We are at the time of "the end of grand narratives," as described by Lyotard. We are already in the constellation of meta, in the post-industrial, post-political, in this very post-theory, as Eagleton points out in his book, *After theory* (2004). The emerging cultural theories do not reflect on the large scale but focus on everyday life. Since Roland Barthes wrote *Mythologies* in 1957 and Jean Baudrillard *The System of Objects* in 1968 the world of common objects radically changed. Since then, the world of objects has expanded so much that a new analysis is required, qualitatively and quantitatively different from modernism's narrative which explains the industrial age. Our relationship with objects is never straightforward but a mixture of knowledge and innocence. Objects are far from being as innocent as Berger suggested, in his book *Ways of Seeing*, and that is what makes them too interesting to ignore. (Sudjic, 2008: 9)

Barry Feldman's work, within the span of a career of more than fifty years to date includes constructions of many descriptions – sculpture, free-standing installations, in situ works, and box constructions; landscape, still life, and portrait easel paintings in oil on canvas; 3D paintings in oil on woven canvas; watercolors on 3D constructed paper; and photography. However, the common object always plays an important role in his career. He used objects he found on the street to create sculptures, giving those items a second life. He still strolls through the Bit Bazaar flea market, discovering things that will find their way into his constructions. In addition to the objects, he puts a lot of thought in his work. He puts in his work equally objects and theories of art.

In this post-metaphysical age, theories of culture seem to be the only place of utopia, the place where contemplation becomes "a truly sensual pleasure" (Brecht). Thought does not interpret the work in this way but becomes a work itself, an aesthetic event. The great contribution of cultural theories is this kaleidoscopic look at history. Beyond any pragmatic and utilitarian enjoyment, cultural theories capriciously focus on the eccentricity of their points, on the transcendence of the gaze, on this scene of seduction. "Everyday life," says Roberts (2006), "always contains a deceitful truth that escapes law or abstract knowledge."

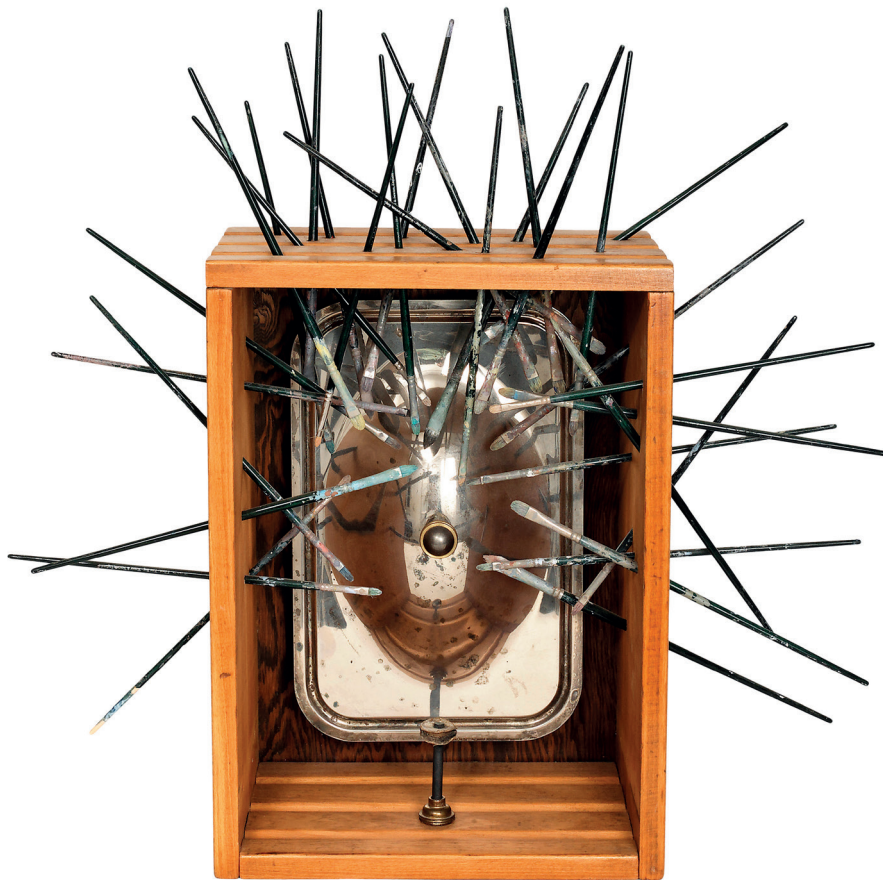


Figure 15: Portrait of the Artist, 66 x 68 x 22 cm



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## PHOTO CREDITS (IN ORDER OF IMAGE APPEARANCE):

First Box / Barry Feldman, Abacus/ Ingo Dunnebier, Porthole #19 / Theofilos Stoupiadis, Rocket #9 / Theofilos Stoupiadis, Lichtenstein Portable / Theofilos Stoupiadis, Duchamp Portable / Theofilos Stoupiadis, Fall of Ikarus / Theofilos Stoupiadis, Celebration of a Fictional Epic Starting with the Letter E / Theofilos Stoupiadis, The Heavens Wept for Joseph / Theofilos Stoupiadis, Box with Fragment / Theofilos Stoupiadis, Box with Lock / Theofilos Stoupiadis, Portrait of the Artist / Ingo Dunnebier



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Randall Warner earned a B.A. in Classical Studies, and was on the staff of Harvard University's Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington D.C. before following a career in the publishing industry in Boston and New York with Houghton Mifflin Company, Alfred A. Knopf (Random House), and Harper's Magazine. She served for many years as Communications Director as well as Archivist at the American Farm School in Thessaloniki, Greece, where she currently lives in the city center. In parallel, she has edited and supervised production and publication of numerous works of history, poetry and fiction in English and Greek languages. A devoted museumgoer and observer of the cultural and artistic world of the city and country she calls home, she works as a freelance editor specializing in books.

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