

Conceptual art, or conceptualism (1970 -), is defined as art in which the concept(s) or idea(s) involved within the work take precedence over traditional aesthetic, technical and material concerns. Spanning over a wide range of artistic tendencies, rather than rules, conceptualism took many forms from performances, to installations and experiences. Both Marcel Duchamp and Fiona Hall are tied to conceptualism through their rejection of appearance over production, and their use of untraditional materials to create highly personal, controversial, fascinating pieces.

Marcel Duchamp (1887 – 1968) is a French American sculptor, painter, and most simply artist. Contributing greatly to contemporary movements and styles in the early 1900’s, Duchamp redefined what it traditionally meant to be artist through his installations, invention of ready-mades, and concepts. His involvement in the Dada movement, between 1910 to 1940, lead him to being considered as the father of conceptual and non-retinal art. Duchamp rejected the concept of retinal art, he preferred, instead, to concentrate on the body as the eye, and of the mind behind art which is communicated in his plethora of ready-mades. The invention of ready-mades is a key achievement in Duchamp’s artist career, and the art form is described as a ‘pre-made’ work of art, bought from a store, and placed in a studio location.

Fiona Hall (1953 -) is a contemporary Australian sculptor, painter, and installation artist. She first emerged in the 1970’s as a photographer, but is well known for her conceptual installations, created from 1990 onwards, which focus heavily on political and environmental issues. Hall uses unconventional and non-traditional materials in her work, namely ordinary objects such as Tupperware, much like Duchamp’s ready-mades. Unlike Duchamp, Hall has not sparked any new forms or movements of art, but rather she popularised creation of installations with great symbolic meaning. Hall also prefers to focus Duchamp’s concept of non-retinal art, and all her pieces are incredibly conceptual, through the intertwining of political and social contexts.

Two of Duchamp’s most famous works are *‘Fountain’* and *‘Sixteen Miles of String’. Fountain* (1917) is Duchamp’s most recognisable work, and possibly most famed. The work consists of a porcelain urinal, rotated 90 degrees, with R. Mutt painted in black acrylic, on the right-hand-side lip. *Sixteen Miles of String* (1942) was impermanent installation displayed in the exhibition *‘First Papers of Surrealism* in 1942, the biggest surrealist show in the United States at the time.

Like *Sixteen Miles of String*, Fiona Hall’s pieces surrounding war and graphic violence are whole-room installations. *‘Barbarians at the Gate’* (2010) features camouflage-painted, wooden beehives surrounded by action figurine dolls and specific countries’ flags. *Slash and Burn* (1997) is a suspended installation of human body parts, knitted from popular war film VHS tapes.

Duchamp and Hall’s pieces are all incredibly contemporary, as they challenge traditional understandings of art, involve collaboration with other artists, and utilise new and unusual media. Both of Duchamp’s pieces challenge traditions through their art form and subject matter. *‘Fountain’* broke traditional art stereotypes in 1917, when created as it was considered too vulgar and disgusting to be displayed in the Society of Independent Artist’s exhibition, despite there being no official judging panel. Duchamp purposely created the piece to test rules regarding art entry, and the idea of ‘what is art?’ Duchamp’s urinal is a ready-made, which was uncommon during the early 1900’s but by 1917 the art form had made its mark. However the Society additionally rejected *‘Fountain’* as they deemed it *‘[did not] meet the requirements of a ready-made’* asthey are supposed to be inherently neutral and chosen with no aesthetic thought. A urinal was considered a sexualised object and that Duchamp would not have chosen it unintentionally. *‘Sixteen Miles of String’* was one of the first installations, in a time when surrealist paintings were the norm. The piece was created as a way of persuading upper-class aristocrat viewers into a ‘new way of seeing art’ rather than the rehearsed ‘choreography’ of moving side to side, along a wall. Duchamp wanted visitors not only see, but experience the exhibition, forcing the audience to be constantly aware of not only the art, but their movements by way of climbing through the ‘miles’ of string. The constant awareness required links clearly to Duchamp’s rejection of retinal art, art only for the eye. *‘Sixteen Miles of String’* is clearly a non-retinal artist piece, as it an experience, climbing physically through the art, which uses other senses like touch, rather than only sight. The audience was also seen as part of the exhibition, as Duchamp considered the physicality of being ‘within’ his installation, as the ‘finishing’ of the piece.

Like Duchamp’s *‘Sixteen Miles of String’* Hall’s pieces are also installations, created during a period where the art form is definitely more common, but still not popularised. *‘Slash and Burn’* and *‘Barbarians at the Gate’* much like Duchamp’s installation, challenge understandings through the ability of the viewer to physically be within the artwork. In all 3 pieces, there is the opportunity to walk between the materials used, and to be involved. Hall also considers the audience effect upon the work inaugural in the ‘completion’ of *‘Slash and Burn’*, rather than the physical existence. The act of viewers walking around the installation creates air-pockets, causing the knitted film body parts to sway in the breeze, making the human body parts look realistic.

*‘Barbarians at the Gate’* and *‘Sixteen Miles of String’*, both involve collaboration with other artists, in some form. To create the beehives, Hall enlisted the help of upcoming art students, who were involved in painting the camouflage of each countries. She specifically hand-picked international or immigrant art students who had some heritage connecting the student to the country. Contrastingly, Duchamp collaborated with unwilling, professional artists for his installation, featuring surrealist works of Max Ernst, Picasso and Paul Klee. The reaction these surrealist artists’ to *‘Sixteen Miles of String’* was ultimately negative, many thought their efforts to smuggle their pieces out of war-torn Europe were unappreciated, through covering by the string.

Unlike any of the other works, *‘Slash and Burn’* also includes appropriation of other’s art to some degree, VHS tapes. The films can be considered ‘art’, in some form, or another, and Hall has used them as the physical media with her piece. The VHS tapes can be considered appropriation still, as Hall as left the case intact, below the bottom of each knitted, suspended body part, with the film trailing out, therefore the ‘art’ (or tape) is still in its original form.

The use of new, unusual media is crucial in contemporary, and both Hall and Duchamp have fulfilled this specific ‘requirement’. In *‘Fountain’* Duchamp’s selection of the urinal is the perfect example of new media. It was uncommon, for sexualised objects to have a place in art, surrealism was popular, as evident in the rejection of the piece from the Society of Independent Artists exhibition. *‘Sixteen Miles of String’* also includes unusual media, as ordinary twine has been used to create the piece, as well as the involvement of other artist paintings. The utilisation of twine to create the installation allows depth to be portrayed, as the background includes the other artists pieces, and the fore and middle ground depicts Duchamp’s layers of twine. Hall’s piece *‘Slash and Burn’* uses the film inside VHS tapes of popular late 20th century war movies, which is highly unconventional, knitted, to create the 36 body parts. However, *‘Barbarians at the Gate’* depicts the widest variety of ‘new’ and peculiar materials out of the entirety of the four pieces. Real, functional, beehives have been used to represent each country, with the bees being tended to daily. Action figures have been hung from the roof, and architectural materials have been used to create each key building on top of each country’s beehive.

All four pieces are highly personal to their creator, through their representation of the artist’s beliefs, opinions and past. Both ‘*Barbarians at the Gate’* and ‘*Slash and Burn’* reflect Fiona Hall’s personal beliefs regarding war, violence and the media. *‘Barbarians at the Gate’* is linked to Hall’s personal experience in the Middle East, as she spent over 4 months researching for the creation of the piece. The architecture atop of the beehives not only symbolise the countries involved in the crisis but also places Hall has visited. Contrastingly ‘*Slash and Burn’* relates to Hall’s past and opinion regarding the media. The movies’ VHS tapes which have been chosen are all films she watched and enjoyed as a teenager and adult – movies that she grew up with, such as *‘Apocalypse Now’*. Hall’s creation also reflects her negative opinion of the media regarding the over-glorification of violence, and the dramatization of violence and death, as a heroic, ‘good’ act.

Unlike Hall’s artworks, Duchamp’s are not only personal in the subject matter, meaning and messages conveyed, but also in the creation. In *‘Sixteen Miles of String’*, the repetitive process of ‘stringing’ was used to create the installation, which would have been quite tiresome, reflecting Duchamp’s opinion on surrealism. He was slightly sympathetic to the movement due to its beauty, but generally felt the numerous protocols and rules associated with creation of a surrealist piece were time-consuming and tedious. The paintings on display at the *‘First Papers of Surrealism’*, which the audience intentionally came to appreciate, were also hand-pick by Duchamp himself. So called ‘primitive art’ was chosen; i.e. traditional surrealist art, by the likes of Max Ernst, Paul Klee and Pablo Picasso among many others. The act of obscuring the world-class paintings, again, links to Duchamp’s intentions, he was covering the old, conventional art, and forcing people to look at his own art, what he believed was art of the future. *‘Fountain’* however, reflects Duchamp’s opinion’s about not only surrealist art, but ‘elitist’ art, as *‘something you piss on’* (Stephen Hicks, philosopher), through the use of the cheap, common urinal. The selection of a urinal, was careful and precise, he intentionally wanted to provoke the Society, and make his rejection of ‘traditional’ art evident.

Fiona Hall’s pieces focus more heavily on cultural and political issues within her contemporary time period, whereas Duchamp’s work highlight social issues during the Dada movement. *‘Slash and Burn’* identifies the tendency of the Western media and Hollywood, in particular, to glorify war, and dramatize violence so destruction becomes a ‘heroic’ act. Hall clearly displays her criticism through the use of classic cult war films such as *‘Gallipoli’* and *‘Apocalypse Now’*. Unlike the other three pieces, the cultural background of the viewer may affect their interpretation of *‘Slash and Burn’*, and in turn changes the gravity of the piece. Western audiences, or people who have known no conflict within their country many be shocked by the criticism of Hollywood, as they perceive these films as accurate and truthful. However, audiences from countries of violence, would perceive the piece as accurate in its glorification of violence. *‘Barbarian’s at the Gate’* demonstrates a political context, the violence in the Middle East during the Syrian conflict. Hall created the piece during a violent period (2010), when the Afghanistan war had ended, but the Syrian conflict was just commencing. The countries featured, through architecture on the beehives are all involved in the conflict, but Hall does not condemn their involvement, unlike her criticisms in *‘Slash and Burn’*, she simply displays the facts.

*‘Fountain’* highlights the social issues during Duchamp’s period quite clearly, particularly the problem of elitist art. The piece was rejected from a supposedly ‘unbiased’, non-judgemental exhibition, even though the creator – Duchamp, under the pseudonym R. Mutt paid the six dollar entrance fee. Duchamp wanted to test the boundaries of what ‘traditionalists’ considered art (as discussed in the contemporary paragraph). The use of the pseudonym R. Mutt additionally highlighted social structure and issues during the 1910’s. The name ‘Mutt’ may have come from the popular comic strip Mutt and Jeff. However, it is more likely that ‘Mutt’ was a spin-off of the J.L Mott Ironworks, the company that created his ‘fountain’. The Ironworks generally made lower-class urinals, ones common in prisons. By Duchamp choosing a poor quality urinal, a juxtaposition was created between the aristocratic viewers and the common art. *‘Fountain’*, unlike other art in the early 1900’s, was more suited to middle or lower-class society people, which was Duchamp’s entire purpose with majority of his earlier conceptual pieces. Mutt is American slang for fool, a small trick played by Duchamp, to make fun of his audience.

The titles of Hall’s and Duchamp’s pieces are symbolically linked to the messages and meanings within each piece. ‘*Sixteen Miles of String’* alludes to the use of, obviously sixteen miles of string, when in actual fact only one mile was used. Duchamp used ordinary white string and hand ‘webbed’ the twine across the surrealist painting. The use of ordinary string was crucial, as it links to Duchamp’s opinion of art is for the ‘ordinary’, everyday person, not just upper class elitist groups. Additionally the webbing joined or was close to, the frame of each piece, connecting all the artworks together physically, visually and conceptually. Conceptually, the connections also relate to Duchamp as being the father of conceptual art, the string was not supposed by be aesthetically pleasing, rather it was the process and thought behind the piece that should be celebrated. Visually, the string was just another ‘curtain’ in life to see through, and the viewer need to look beyond the surface to have an appreciation for not only the paintings, but also other people. Although not shown in the image above (top of page 1), small children were instructed to play with a ball between the twine and priceless paintings, symbolising, again that art is for everyone. *‘Fountain’*

Hall’s two pieces, like Duchamp’s, are also highly symbolic, but her titles have the tendency to have layers of meaning. *‘Slash and Burn’* is an agricultural term used when clearing land, however Hall repurposes this term and relates back to a political context. When soldiers ambush in war they ‘slash and burn’, but not the agriculture, the enemy. The violent nature of the title links to the thirty-six graphic body parts suspended in the air, which include faces, arms, legs, and torsos. The vacant expression contrast with the open-mouths, creating a strange shocked expression, almost affronted by the violence of the war movie utilised, and representing the ghost of those killed. All of the suspended body parts depict the atrocities committed within each war movie, with decapitated heads and severed limbs among others. Hall is clearly criticising tendency of Hollywood to create war as a ‘heroic’ period in history, when in reality it only results in injury and death, as evident in the limbs. Hall also creates a striking contrast between the weightlessness of the media, thin VHS tape film, and the gravity of the violent subject. *‘Barbarians at the Gate’* features beehives in a grid shape, with suspended action figures hanging, and painted walls. The title includes alludes the subject matter of the piece, that the countries involved in the Syrian conflict, may be considered ‘barbaric’ due to their action. A juxtaposition is also created, as over half of countries displayed by the beehives are so called ‘civilised’ Western nations. The beehives link to each country through the painted camouflage and the architecture on top of the lid. Each camouflage pattern reflects a country involved within the Syrian conflict, supported by the buildings on top of the lids which mirror physical architecture. For example, for the Russian beehive, a small scale of Lenin’s mausoleum has been built on top. The use of function beehives is highly symbolic in *‘Barbarians at the Gate’*. Bees are incredibly social animals, and just like humans, have social structure in place. However, Hall seems to suggest that the bees’ social hierarchy is more efficient than humans, which often ends in disasters such as the Syrian conflict.

Within *‘Slash and Burn’* and *‘Fountain’* gender is not only suggested, but referenced through both the physical artwork and the process of creation. *‘Fountain’* clearly portrays the masculine gender, through the display of the urinal. Similarly, *‘Slash and Burn’* emanates as masculine feeling, as the piece is created out VHS war film tapes, popular between the 1980’s and 90’s. The time period is key, as traditional values associated with men such as violence and power abuse, were widespread and common. However Hall contradicts the extreme masculinity by using such feminine process to create the piece - knitting, which is traditionally associated with women, particularly housewives.

Both Hall in *‘Barbarians at the Gate’* and Duchamp with *‘Sixteen Miles of String’* using repetition as a key element and practice within their pieces. *‘Barbarians at the Gate’* features wooden beehives, painted in the camouflage of a country which corresponds to violence in the Syrian war. The repetition of the camouflage draws the viewer’s similarities and differences within the numerous beehives. Colour similarities, especially in countries with similar terrain such as Syria and Iraq, is clearly evident, as well as the variety of angles within each camouflage. The patterns also create unity within the composition, tying together all the different colours, countries, even shapes with the camouflage, with the similar uniform patterns. *‘Sixteen Miles of String’* also features repetition in the process of ‘stringing’, but, unlike the camouflage it is inconsistent, with less ‘space’ between the line of string along the floor rather than in the mid-section of the room.

With the exception of *‘Sixteen Miles of String’*, the focal points within the other artworks is clearly evident. In *‘Barbarians at the Gate’* the focal point is the beehives, with the hanging action figures and painted walls, supporting. The action figures and walls painted in the colours of Syrian terrain add depth to the installation, as well as context. Without the figurines, depicting atrocities committed in times of conflict, the countries’ flags and the walls, it is possibly that the link to the Middle East may be lost. *‘Slash and Burn’*, unlike *‘Barbarians at the Gate’* does not have a single focal point, rather the grid-like layout centres the piece, and allows the focus to installation as a whole. For Duchamp’s *‘Fountain’*, is the idea of a urinal, as dirty, sexualised object posed as art, that is the focus rather than the physical piece.

Unlike any of the other pieces, *‘Slash and Burn’* features movement of the physical piece within its representation. As the media of VHS film is so light, the knitted limbs almost sway in the breeze, creating the illusion of ghostly body parts, from the war movies of which they were created from. *‘Fountain’* also illustrates the element of balance through the rotation of the urinal. The painting of R. Mutt on the right-hand side lip of the urinal, should cause unevenness, however due to the 90 degrees rotation the piece becomes balanced. *‘Barbarians at the Gate’* depicts unity, through the beehives being the same structure and size, allowing the audiences vision to be unflooded.

Overall Marcel Duchamp’s and Fiona Hall’s styles are very different, considering they come from opposite ends of the 20th century. Hall has focused on cultural and political issues of contemporary society, whereas Duchamp highlights the social problems within the artistic world of the early 1900’s. However, their pieces do have much in common such as their personal significance, heavy use of symbolism and use of similar art elements and principles. Both Duchamp and Hall are to be considered highly conceptual artists, who create deeply important pieces within their societies.

**Installation and Conceptual Art Resources**

Art Story: *Conceptual Art* - <http://www.theartstory.org/movement-conceptual-art.htm>

Oxford Bibliographies: *Installation Art* – <http://www.oxfordbiblographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199920105-0026.xml>

**Duchamp Resources**

Independent resources: *The Loo that shook the world: Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabi* - <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/the-loo-that-shook-the-world-duchamp-man-ray-picabi-784384.html>

Institute of Contemporary Art University of Pennsylvania: *His Twine: Marcel Duchamp and the Limits of Exhibition History* - <https://icaphila.org/miranda/2614/histwine-marcel-duchamp-and-the-limits-of-exhibition-history>

MoMA: *Marcel Duchamp* - <https://www.moma.org/artists/1634>

Web Archive: *Fountain* – [https://web.archive.org/web/20041012093700/http://arthist.binhamton.edu/duchamp/fountain.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20041012093700/http%3A//arthist.binhamton.edu/duchamp/fountain.html)

Wikipedia: *Marcel Duchamp* - <https://en-wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcel_Duchamp>

**Hall Resources**

Design and Art Australia Online: *Fiona Hall* - <https://www.daao.org.au/bio/fiona-hall/biography/>

Melbourne High School Library Guides: *Visual Art: Fiona Hall*  - <http://libguides.mhs.vic.edu.au/c.php?g=174538&p=1150312>

YouTube: *Fiona Hall: Sunday Art* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZDIC4xaNDY>

YouTube: *Fiona Hall – Barbarians at the Gate* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARiRrneyGK0>