

## MODULE TWELVE

### Everyday Images and Objects

This module investigates artists' incorporation of everyday images and objects in their work. This practice began in the early twentieth century, with Marcel Duchamp and his readymades, and it remains an important part of contemporary artistic practice. Throughout this module, consider your relationship to the objects the artists have used and how your understanding of them is transformed when the original objects are altered.

#### Marcel Duchamp. *Bicycle Wheel*. 1951 (third version, after lost original of 1913)

- How do you think Duchamp constructed this piece?
- What are the respective functions of these two objects? Why do you think Duchamp brought them together in this work?
- Consider Duchamp's process and choice of materials in *Bicycle Wheel*. How does the work challenge your ideas of what art should be?



"Readymades" were the hallmark work of Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), in which he took mass-produced commonplace objects, such as a shovel or a urinal, and presented them, unaltered, as art. In *Bicycle Wheel* Duchamp affixed an inverted bicycle fork and wheel to the seat of a stool. He called works such as this, which incorporate a slight alteration to the objects used, "assisted readymades." With his readymades and assisted readymades Duchamp challenged pre-existing definitions of art and the importance of creating a one-of-a-kind work. The first *Bicycle Wheel*, of 1913, was lost; Duchamp created this version in 1951, asserting that it is equally as valid as the original.

#### Meret Oppenheim. *Object*. 1936

- What are the objects in this work, and what changes has Oppenheim brought to them?
- How does changing the texture of the cup, saucer, and spoon alter their functionality?
- The title of this work is *Object*. If you could choose a different title, what would it be?



Meret Oppenheim (1913–1985) created *Object* by covering a teacup, saucer, and spoon in gazelle fur. The work was inspired by a conversation between Oppenheim and artists Pablo Picasso and Dora Maar at a café: Picasso admired Oppenheim's fur-covered bracelets and remarked that one could cover

anything with fur, to which Oppenheim replied, "Even this cup and saucer." Although she maintained the structure of the store-bought items, through her alteration of the surface material Oppenheim rendered them completely useless. This type of whimsical juxtaposition is a hallmark of Surrealism, a movement with which Oppenheim was affiliated.

**Turn and Talk:** Think of a household item. If you could change one thing about it what would it be? Would you change the texture, like Oppenheim? Would you change the size, shape, material, or color? How would this transformation affect how the object is used or interpreted?

### **Jasper Johns. *Map*. 1961**

- How has Johns altered the traditional map of the United States? Describe his brushstrokes and color choices.
- Why do you think Johns chose a map for his subject?
- How does his rendition affect your perception of the United States?



Jasper Johns (born 1930) began his career in New York City during the height of Abstract Expressionism, a movement celebrated for its highly individualistic forms of abstract painting. In *Map* Johns applied an expressive brushstroke to a recognizable and mundane image: a map of the United States of America. By using familiar objects and images, like targets, flags, and maps, Johns focused viewers' attention not on the subject of the painting but rather on his process of making it.

### **Gerhard Richter. *Helen*. 1963**

- Where do you think the image of this woman came from? Who do you think she is?
- Richter adapted this image from a photograph. How do you think he altered the original image?
- Why do you think Richter used a photograph as his source?



Gerhard Richter (born 1932) began incorporating photography into his painting practice in the early 1960s through the use of photographs as source imagery. In *Helen*, for example, Richter enlarged an image of an unknown woman, reproducing it against a flat, neutral background. By relying on photographs—culled from newspapers and magazines—as source material, Richter was able to eliminate his preoccupation with creating original subject matter and focus his efforts entirely on the act of painting.

**Thomas Demand. *Room (Zimmer)*. 1996**

- What objects do you see in this space? What kind of room could it be?
- Describe the placement of the objects. What mood does their arrangement create?
- How does this photograph meet or defy your expectations of high-art photography?



Thomas Demand (born 1964) did not begin his artistic career in photography; he originally took up the medium as a means of recording the paper constructions he produced as a sculptor. In the early 1990s, however, Demand started creating these constructions for the sole purpose of photographing them, translating images pulled from the mass media into life-size models made entirely from colored paper and cardboard. Once he has photographed them, he disassembles his work. In his photographs Demand intentionally blurs the line between reality and artificiality and challenges viewers' conceptions about the documentary truth of photography.

**Turn and Talk:** Think of a room that is important to you. Where is it? Why is it significant?

## **Art-Making Activity**

In this module we discussed how artists have incorporated commonplace items and images in their artwork, often by altering an object to affect its appearance and function. Ask participants to re-create one or multiple objects that they experience in day-to-day life. In preparation, gather images of everyday objects from magazines, newspapers, or personal photographs. Spread them out on a table and ask participants to select one or two, keeping in mind the function of each object pictured and any particular significance they attach to it. Then ask participants to consider how they might alter one aspect of the object—scale, material, or context in which it's found—keeping in mind how these changes affect the object's functional capacity. Then ask them draw or construct their new object, and, once they are finished, discuss the reasoning behind the changes they have made.