

Readymade Reading

by Katharine Adkins

The artist David Hammons's work *The Holy Bible, Old Testament* (2002) is a thick tome, bound in black leather, with gilded edges. Along the spine in gold tooling are the words "The Holy Bible" and "Old Testament." Rather than resting on a shelf, however, this item sits on a pedestal in a museum, safely preserved behind Plexiglass.

Is this a work of art? Is it a book? Or—can it be—both?

Upon first glimpse, it appears as though Hammons has taken a hefty copy of the Old Testament and claimed it as his own work of art. But in fact, this is not the Bible at all. Hammons has bound a copy of the artist Marcel Duchamp's catalogue raisonné (a compilation of all works by an artist)—*The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* by Arturo Schwarz—to look like a Bible.

Why would Hammons do this?

In 1913, Duchamp, one of art history's great iconoclasts, attached a bicycle wheel to a stool, signed his name, and *voilà*—Art. He continued to do this with other objects: a comb, a snow shovel, a bottle drying rack, and—perhaps most famously—a urinal. These are so-called "readymades," a class of artworks created by virtue of the artist's signature and (sometimes) a title. Thus, a work of art was created through the single act of writing.

By signing a mundane, utilitarian object, Duchamp declared his artistic intent and encapsulated many philosophical and aesthetic questions into one small gesture. The readymades question not

only what it is to be an artist but what *is* art—who determines what art is and by what process does a shovel, or a piece of marble, or a canvas become a work of art?

Hammons poses these same questions in *The Holy Bible* by creating a readymade out of a book chronicling the life work of the inventor of the readymade. Hammons's personal feelings about

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Duchamp's oeuvre are perhaps hinted at in his decision to bind the book so that it appears to be a religious document. But there is more to it than the implication that Duchamp is a "god" in the art world, the father of contemporary art whose creations should be revered. Hammons is also making a visual pun.

Duchamp's love of puns is well known. Puns are inextricably tied up with language, relying on a reader or speaker to complete them. In *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), Duchamp took a cheap reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, drew a mustache on it, and added the inscription "L.H.O.O.Q.," making it a corrected readymade (corrected readymades were those in which

Duchamp adjusted the appearance of the object, much like Hammons did in his work). At first nonsensical, when read aloud, the inscription sounds like the French phrase "elle a chaud au cul" meaning (roughly) "she has a hot ass." Duchamp, then, relies on the literary qualities of his phrase and assumes there will be a reader to understand the humor of his work. Students of art history are often told to "read" a painting, meaning study the canvas from one side to the other, think about it, absorb it, and come to an understanding of what the artist is trying to tell us. By "reading" Duchamp's readymade, we realize the joke—both the one plainly written on the work, but also the underlying joke that is being played on the art world. Readymades are visual satires, visual puns, and they depend on an audience to understand and translate them through thought into art.

Hammons's pun lies in the fact that he presents us with a book we cannot read, one that is safely entombed beneath Plexiglass, enshrined on its pedestal in a museum. Just as Duchamp made his useful objects useless by transforming them into art, Hammons has created an unreadable, readerless book. His decision to bind it as

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though it is a Bible highlights the fact that it has become—like all readymades—a holy relic, a work of art. It is simultaneously uplifted in status (and price) while left as a memorial to a moment in time (note that it is the *Old*, not the *New*, Testament), no longer able to fulfill its original function and instead left to be looked at, never read.

But the reality is that a book that can't be read is still a book, and a urinal that can't be used is still a urinal. *The Holy Bible, Old Testament* is both book and art. The essential qualities that make it a book are unaltered, even if it is dressed in the garb (some would say “emperor's new clothes”) of the art world. The intent and actions of the artist can only go so far in transforming an ordinary object into a work of art; marble is still stone, canvas is still cloth, and a shovel is still a shovel. While function and place

are signifiers that help us determine how to classify an object, it is clear that certain classifications are not mutually exclusive. In fact, unlike Duchamp's readymades, Hammons's *Holy Bible* relies on the original function associated with

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its form in order to convey the artwork's meaning. Its existence as a book—an everyday object—that has lost its purpose indicates that it is a readymade, while its binding provides commentary on the readymades in much the same way that the readymades supplied criticism on art.

Hammons made an artistic—perhaps an aesthetic—choice in deciding to make a book into art, much as a sculptor would choose which stone best suited his or her purpose or a painter would select the colors that matched his or her desired effect. In this way, a book has not only become a work of art, but it has maintained its own identity as a book. By “reading” Hammons's work, the viewer is able to appreciate the humorous aspects and almost *trompe l'oeil* qualities of *The Holy Bible, Old Testament*. Hammons has successfully “fooled the eye” of the viewer into believing that they are looking at a book, the Bible, when in reality they are looking at a book, Duchamp's catalogue raisonné, that is simultaneously a work of art and an observation on the elusive and indefinable category called “art.” VI

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