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“Chacun son Marcel”? Meerduidigheid in het werk van Marcel Duchamp

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Summary and Conclusion

Recent decades have seen an exponential growth in the literature on Duchamp as well as a continuously increasing disparity of the interpretations that the oeuvre inspired. Important was the publication of *Ephemerides* in 1993 with detailed biographical information about the artist. Its appearance allowed for varied explanations; something that appealed to the interdisciplinary approach, which has always characterized the study of Art History. In addition, an approach arose that Nodelman described in 2000 as follows: “an analysis of the work as a system of signification – a system which is itself the work’s most distinctive characteristic” (Nodelman, 2000, 41). This vision, that prevailed according to Nodelman, is based on publications that rely on an appreciation of works of Duchamp that had, up until then, hardly been recognized as autonomous artworks: his own mini museum in the *Box in a Valise* and the notes from the *Green Box*. In this appreciation of the oeuvre, as a system of signification, a contemporary art theory was also recognized. This view of Duchamp, which can be termed postmodern due to its emphasis on self-reflection, followed the equally contemporary approach that had re-established Duchamp’s reputation in the sixties and seventies, first, in relation to the theme of art and consumerism, and second, in the emphasis on the conceptual aspect of art where particularly the principle of the readymade was understood as a critical examination of the art system.

This has led to an exegesis that varied from a panoramic overview of the oeuvre as a result of the interaction between the artist’s life and work to contextual findings relating to a particular work. Sometimes, specific issues are emphasized such as the importance of puns. Others have searched for the hidden key that opens the door to esoteric explanations. Aside from this, the aforementioned approach, that regards the oeuvre as a motive to construct a contemporary art theory or art philosophy, remains customary. An introspective discipline seems to have emerged. The literature seems to have become part of the oeuvre and Duchamp himself a genre in art.

In my overview of the international reception of Duchamp in Chapter 1, I examine the plurality of possible approaches. In accordance with the duality of Duchamp’s life as an artist, I chose 1958 as the turning point when the current reception of Duchamp began, after he had long been considered as an artist from the distant past. I pay

special attention to the publications of some friends of the past that were reprinted and bridged the gap in reception.

The overview of the Dutch reception in Chapter 2 reveals that it is almost completely devoted to Duchamp as an alleged exemplar for the development of art from 1960 onwards. This leads either to an appreciation of Duchamp or to a rejection of his artistry, depending on the author's affinity with the art of that period. For some, however, this exemplary role was reason to consider the work of Duchamp as *passé*. This distinction with the diversity of the international reception is partly due to the fact that a historical reception of Duchamp was not supported by interviews and texts from Dutch contemporaries and artists from the period *before* the change in reception in the late fifties, as did happen elsewhere.

In Chapter 3, I demonstrate that the cause of this diversity in reception is not merely a product of projection by different authors, but primarily a result of the ambiguity of Duchamp. This ambiguity first emerges in his earlier works that were often originated from wordplay, which in itself searches for a double meaning. But Duchamp's ambiguous attitude also appears later, when his reputation is re-established and he, as his own biographer who delivers the knowledge and directs his earlier work, reproduces his first readymades with a contemporary pop art approach. As a true Dadaist he acknowledged only a permanent present, and from that position, paired ambiguity with a dandy-like indifference.

The coexistence of differing but equally plausible explanations and Duchamp's ambiguity and/or indifference lead me to question which approach to choose when I began writing articles about Duchamp and his work, as taking conflicting viewpoints surely makes an author's argument implausible. After reading Dario Gamboni's *Potential Images, Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (2002), I saw the variety of possibilities as an advantage and not as being in conflict with scientific objectivity. Gamboni's conception of the artwork as a *potential image* allowed me to consider diverse views about Duchamp alongside each other, as complementary instead of mutually exclusive, even if they are put forward by one author. Gamboni says that ambiguity is inherent to images. That it is something universal, occurring in every culture at every stage of history, but that it was cultivated especially in fin-de-siècle France and that this boom of potential images occurred simultaneously with the study of the psychology of perception. These ambiguous images are dependent on its viewer for their realization. They make him aware of his active and subjective way of looking. Their ambiguity surfaces through a creative act of perception. Thus perception is subjective, concludes Gamboni, and with that argument he defends himself against the charges of subjectivity and arbitrariness, especially with regard to the explanation of potential images, with their ambiguity knowingly embedded by the artist. Ambiguity requires a subjective engagement, he concludes.

Duchamp assumes a contemplating viewer who examines the accuracy of his assumptions and considers alternative solutions. Moreover, it is true that if ambiguity is understood as a form of concealment by the author, a retort from the viewer is to be expected that aims to counter by revealing, albeit within the reasonable limits of consistency and plausibility. The method I have proposed is similar to the "educated guesswork" of archaeologists and palaeontologists or medical researchers – an informed guess based on secondary evidence that supports a hypothesis. This approach respects and values the claim of Duchamp on indifference as a way of promoting the ambiguity desired by him. This approach further allows for multiple meanings of a work to coexist, provided that the reasoning behind them is plausible.

Unequivocal revelation that digresses to narrative is not the aim here – demonstrating the beauty of concealment is. That this produces a different, more speculative kind of Art History seems consistent with the cultural life of this period that is characterized, as Gamboni and other authors have determined, by the desire for ambiguity.

Special attention is devoted to Duchamp's language play, in which his ambiguous attitude emerges concretely and which is seen by many writers as essential to Duchamp. I underline this and give suggestions for possible explanations in that direction, supplementing those that were previously mentioned by other authors. I compare Duchamp's wordplay that after 1912 began to play a crucial role in the development of his work with the way it previously functioned in the humorous drawings he published until 1910. I see this inartistic, not to say anti-artistic, decision in 1912 as a recalcitrant answer of a dandy to the rejection of *Nude descending a Staircase 2* by his contemporaries of the Section d'Or. His language play substituted the scientific basis for Cubism that his contemporaries sought in the hypothetical epistemology of Poincaré, for instance, in the non-Euclidean geometry and in Bergson's notions of duration and simultaneity.

In Chapter 4, I will review the oeuvre chronologically while formulating my own findings in regard to what is already known in the current body of literature. Additionally, my ideas for a speculative art history will be put into practice, as I will search for that which has potentially played a role in the development of the works. I will outline a few examples below. To the relationship that has been established between the cryptic phrases of *The Jura-Paris Road* and Roussel's *Impressions of Africa*, I add my suggestion that Duchamp follows a the reverse path of Roussel, not from text to image but from image to text. Images that function as inspiration for his text are, in my view, to be found, for example, in the advertisements for acetylene headlights and for a car in the December 7 1912 Christmas issue of *L'Illustration*. This is even more likely in conjunction with a passage from the poem *Zone* that Apollinaire had recited during the week of October 1912 in Etival. That week with Apollinaire, Picabia and Gabrielle Buffet caused a shift in the artistry of Duchamp.

While discussing the first readymades, such as *bicycle wheel on a kitchen stool*, I will make a connection between the note: "*Peut-on faire des œuvres qui ne soient pas 'd'art'?*" ("Can one make works which are not works of 'art'?") from 1913 that Duchamp only published in 1967, within the discourse of the sixties on the artwork as an *objet trouvé* (found object) and after the reproduction of the readymades in 1964. I suggest that the interrogative form of that note connects to the title of the catalogue *Is it Art?* that had appeared at the *Armory Show* in New York in 1912, where his *Nude descending a Staircase 2* resulted in a scandalous success. As before with the humorous drawings, where the meaning is created in the symbiotic relationship between the caption and the image, the new objects in his studio receive their meaning in their description or title. This meaning is often based on wordplay that serves as a means by which Duchamp transforms everyday objects into readymades. *Bicycle wheel on a kitchen stool* can thus be seen as a wordplay along the lines of Roussel, especially when the work is designated in French: *une roue sur une selle* (a wheel on a stool), a tribute to Roussel as inspiration. In addition, it can be seen as a quip about visual arts in its reference to a stool (*selle*) as a symbol of sculpture, to the introduction of the pedestal in sculpture by Brancusi and to the circles of colour by Delaunay and Kupka that were designed to suggest a sense of movement. After *bicycle wheel on a kitchen stool*, a rack for drying bottles in his workshop appeared. I will relate this work to the watermill in *The Large Glass*. The reason for this is to be found in a visit to the Hérisson Falls in the

Jura Mountains, not only because they were, given their proximity to Etival, a likely destination for a group getaway in October 1912, but also on the basis of a drawing from the *Green Box*, in which the water shoots over the *Bachelors* in accordance with the situation at the falls, as travel guides at the time also stated. In my reconstruction, Duchamp was not looking for a drainer when he went to visit the newly opened modern Bazar de l'Hotel de Ville and came across a bottle rack with the name *Hérisson*, where he, in a Roussellian way, realized the similarities with the series of waterfalls with the same name at Etival. The bottle rack with the name *Hérisson* merges the journey along the waterfalls into a simultaneous representation of space and time, to put it in Cubist terms, coloured by the erotic feelings of the traveller for his guide Gabrielle Buffet.

The reason for *3 Stoppages Étalon* (3 Standard Stops), in which Duchamp subjected the meter to chance with three different lengths as a result, I find in the *Conférence Internationale de l'heure* of October 1912. This conference was held to decide whether the Parisian time, which was connected to the old Paris 0-meridian, should still be followed internationally after the 0-meridian was relocated to Greenwich. The change to the English time was pre-emptively realized by setting the clock back 9 minutes and 21 seconds before the congress was held. With that the unity of time was – like the meter that had been a 10-millionth of a quarter of the 0-meridian through Paris – detached from its referent in nature and became an abstract unit. At the same time, mathematical certainties were qualified from a theoretical point by the hypothetical, non-Euclidean scientific philosophy of Poincaré, whose death in 1912 received extensive media coverage in newspapers and magazines. All this formed the context for Duchamp's pataphysical experiment with the meter. Duchamp's action is similar to a hilarious piece on the loss of the meter that was published in the August 29 1912 issue of *Le Sourire*. One solution was to buy a *mètre pliant*, literally a 'flexible meter' – a ruler.

Pharmacy, a colour print of a winter landscape in which Duchamp added figures on the horizon in green and red, refers, in my view, to the impending divorce of his sister Suzanne, whose marriage to a pharmacist proved unhappy, something that Duchamp connected with the book *Madame Bovary*. The sight of the train of lights in the distance when approaching Rouen was cited by Duchamp as the inspiration for this work, and my suggestion is that he was thinking about Ry, the village close to Blainville where he and Suzanne had spent their childhood. Ry is also the place where Flaubert situated the amorous life of Madame Bovary and the town is characterized in the book by the pharmacy of Homais. Duchamp must have often seen this famous pharmacy in his youth. When he arrived in New York one and a half years later, he said he was from the village of Madame Bovary. Indeed, this fictional character was modelled on a girl from Blainville, who married a doctor there and moved to Ry.

The colour of the *Bachelors* in *The Great Glass* is provisional; they are still in lead, a primer, "waiting for their colour as croquet cones." Although there is only one military uniform in the *Bachelors* (the cavalryman), I see in that "waiting for colour" a reference to a discussion that took place at the time about the colour of the army uniform. The arrival of advanced weaponry demanded the replacement of the brightly coloured uniforms with camouflage clothing. Other European countries had already chosen khaki and field grey, but in France, the conservative military command kept the traditional red pants until after the Battle of the Marne.

Many readymades in New York originated from the friendship with Arensberg; an avid lover of language games and well aware of Apollinaire, Mallarmé, Freud and Gertrude Stein. In Arensberg, Duchamp found not only a patron, but also a language

researcher akin to Brisset. The friendship with Arensberg and the works that it brought forth confirm the importance of language in the creation of his works. Like philologists of the stature Roussel/Arensberg/Brisset distort the relationship between words and objects, and metaphor makes language literary, Duchamp's readymades make objects "readable" as visual art. In that sense of "made readable," I want to consider the name 'readymade' that Duchamp began to use in 1915; *ready* as a cognate of *to read* in conjunction with the English that he had just started to learn, alongside the well-known reference to the clothing industry.

Fountain was photographed by Stieglitz in front of a painting by Hartley, in which the shape of the urinal is repeated in a horse's ass. In Duchamp's circle of friends, the shape of the urinal was also compared with the contours of a Madonna and a meditating Buddha. That comparison probably has its origins in a different painting by Hartley *Musical Theme (Oriental Symphony)* (1912-1913), that was sold a year earlier by Stieglitz to another acquaintance of Duchamp, John Quinn, and featured images of a Madonna and Child and a meditating Buddha side by side, combined with an abstract shape that corresponds to the contours of the urinal. The contemptuous equation of a urinal with a Madonna and a Buddha or a horse's ass is to be interpreted, in my opinion, as a sneer at the abstracting art that Hartley produced. I further note that to title a urinal *Fountain* is, in my view, not strange given the correspondence in shape with a French *fontaine* (fountain) in the sense of a wall sink – its reservoir disappearing, after its connection to the water supply, above the shell-shaped basin. This association of a urinal with a fountain, but erroneously, was also made by Proust in *À la recherche du temps perdu, Du côté de chez Swann* (In Search of Lost Time: The Way by Swann's).

Duchamp's *Monte Carlo Bond* can be associated with the new conception of film as an art form, with which he got acquainted through Picabia. The two wings of shaving cream on the head of Duchamp in the *Bond*, besides being a reference to Mercury, the god of trading, are, in my view, also traceable to a character in the book *Feu Mathias Pascal* (The late Mattia Pascal) by Luigi Pirandello that L'Herbier was going to adapt for the screen. Duchamp was in the company of Picabia, Satie and Jean Clert and would thus have been aware of L'Herbier's plans. At that time, he was considering quitting as an artist and will have recognized his own situation in the ambiguous existence of the main character in the book and will have related to the typical humour of Pirandello.

Given..., the installation that appeared after the death of Duchamp in 1968 and added a new dimension to the enigmatic meaning of the *Great Glass*, proves to me the crucial importance of the word game in the entire oeuvre of Duchamp. This conclusion was drawn from, among others, the link between the nakedness of the reclining female figure in *Given...* and the notes on the *Bride* of 1913 and her place in *la voie lactée* (The Milky Way) in which the *Bachelors* fire their shots, which I interpret as a *voile actée* (an acted veil). In addition, I link this to the final scene of the ballet *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (The Afternoon of a Faun) from 1912 in which Nijinsky gives the impression that he is mating with a veil. That the idea of *Given...* arose at the waterfall in Chexbres with the shooting range in the foreground, supports my suggestion of recognizing in the *Great Glass* also a geographical aspect, namely in the mill that the Bachelor Machine triggers and that I relate to the water mill along the Hérissou falls.

Because an important aspect of Duchamp's artistry lies in the relationship between work and life, contextual and biographical knowledge is essential to fully appreciate the oeuvre. My approach, where I search for historical details in the situation in which the works were produced, yields, however speculative some assumptions may be, a credible result when it comes to reconstructing the conditions that lead to Duchamp's

works. Such an approach constitutes a necessary counterbalance to the conception of the artist and his work that has been common since the reception in the sixties and that, by using Duchamp as an example, solely wants to illustrate contemporary ideas about art and ignores the historical context of the works. Knowledge of the immediate context is necessary to enable the exchange between the historical dimension and the contemporary recognition on which continuity of the reception of art from the past is always based. Especially this aspect of exchange between two different time periods, the period in which the early works were created and the time after 1958 when Duchamp was rediscovered, characterizes the reception of Duchamp's oeuvre. Duchamp himself provided ambiguous information about his early work, particularly about the readymades that he summarized in the sixties, in line with then current ideas about art. Ambiguity also characterizes the language game that is at the root of many of Duchamp's works. The ambiguous attitude of the artist himself inspired me to a suggestive reading of his oeuvre as images that, as Gamboni puts it, are to be produced by the viewer and in which interpretations as possible views of the artist are included. In a study using this approach, the title *The Definitely Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, the publication from 1991 that formed the basis of my interest in the artist, is still up to date.