A Pun Among Friends

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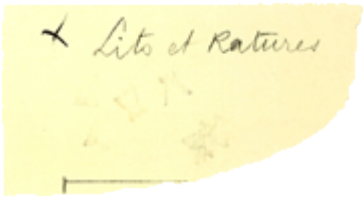

Marcel Duchamp,Note 224,
from Paul Matisse, *Marcel Duchamp: Notes*, 1980 © 2000 Succession Marcel Duchamp, ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris.

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Francis Picabia, Cover of *Litterature*, No. 7
(1 December, 1922)

Marcel Duchamp's teammate [(1)]Francis Picabia illustrated Duchamp's *lits-et-rature* [(2)] pun for the cover of *Litterature* No. 7, 1.12.1922. Two large male shoes are pointing downward between two smaller upwardly pointing female shoes. One sole has a picture of a woman; another sole the picture of a man. Picabia trisected the name "*Litterature*" and wrote above the shoes "*LITS*" ["beds"], in-between the shoes "*ET*" ["and"], and below "*RATURES*" ["erasures"]. (The relative position of the shoes unambiguously indicates what bedroom activity the couple

is enjoying.) In a generation afreud of nothing [3] this is a picture of sublimation: literature is a product of erasing what we do in bed.

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Photograph of Marcel Duchamp and Eve Babitz posing for the photographer Julian Wasser during the Duchamp retrospective at the Pasadena Museum of Art, 1963 © 2000 Succession Marcel Duchamp, ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris.

Forty-one years later Duchamp responded to his departed friend's gambit with this picture of Duchamp and the nude Eve Babitz playing chess [4]. The goal of chess is to mate. We can thus see this picture as the record of a tableau vivant of a word play [5]. Since Freud, vulgar theorists have held that chess and art, to pick two examples, are sublimations of sex. Given Duchamp's attitude towards wordplay versus theory, it is better to see his life long interest in chess and eroticism as a sublimation of this picture's wordplay! Given that the double meaning of "mate" does not exist in French, at last we have a satisfactory explanation of why Duchamp had to emigrate to America. In other words: in the beginning was the word; in the center the pun [6].

Notes

Footnote Return 1. Cabanne asked Duchamp “Who have your best friends been?” Duchamp replied, “Obviously Francis Picabia, who was a teammate, so to speak.” A few paragraphs later, speaking of *Litterature*‘s editor, Andre Breton, Duchamp used chess as a trope for engaged human interaction: “It’s a somewhat difficult sort of friendship, you see what I mean? We don’t play chess together, you understand?” Pierre Cabanne, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, trans. Ron Padgett, Da Capo Press, Inc., 1979, p. 101.

Footnote Return 2. Stephen Jay Gould discusses this annihilating pun in “The Substantial Ghost: Towards a General Exegesis of Duchamp’s Artful Wordplays,”*Tout-fait: The Marcel Duchamp Online Journal*, Vol. 1, no. 2 (May 2000) Duchamp’s pun appears as note 224 of Marcel Duchamp, Notes, Arrangement and Translation Paul Matisse, G. K. Hall & Company, Boston, 1983. Arturo Schwarz lists the pun as S 18 in his “Elements of a descriptive bibliography of Marcel Duchamp’s writings, lectures, translations and interviews,” in The Almost Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp, Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1966; and as No. 25 in his bibliography of the same title in his The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp, third revised and expanded edition, Vol. II, New York, 1997, p. 900. Schwarz mentions the pun and the cover in Complete Works, Vol. I, p. 31. Robert Lebel mentions the puns Duchamp published in Litterature in “Marcel Duchamp and Andre Breton,” in Anne D’Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, ed., Marcel Duchamp, The Museum of Modern Art, 1973, pp. 135-141. The Picabia cover is reproduced in Dawn Ades, Dada and Surrealism Reviewed, Westerham Press, 1978, p. 175, and Marcel Duchamp: Work and Life, ed. Pontus Hulten, MIT, 1993, p. 73. Ades lists among the contents of the issue: “Robert Desnos, ‘Rrose Selavy’. Puns by Desnos which he claimed were transmitted by Rrose Selavy”. Hulten discusses this issue of the journal under the heading “1 December 1922”.

Footnote Return 3. Attributed to the American expatriate “Lost Generation” which occupied Paris in the 1920s.

Footnote Return 4. Marcel Duchamp and Eve Babitz playing chess during the Duchamp retrospective at the Pasadena Museum of Art in 1963. The photograph by Julian Wasser is reprinted in numerous places, including West Coast Duchamp, Bonnie Clearwater, ed., Grassfield Press, Miami Beach, 1991, p. 75, fig. 34; additional photographs of the scene, including a page of Wasser’s contact sheets, are on p. 73, fig. 33 and p. 75, fig. 35. Dickran Tashjian discusses the circumstances of taking the photograph on pp. 71-74 of his article “Nothing Left to Chance: Duchamp’s First Retrospective,” pp. 61-83 in Clearwater. Duchamp is shown with this photograph in Ugo Mulas, New York: The New Art Scene, Holt, Reinhardt, Winston, 1967, p. 74 and studying it on the endpapers of Sur Marcel Duchamp, Calvesi, Izzo, Menna, et al., Fremart Studio, Naples, 1975. Eve Babitz was twenty years old when the photograph was taken. Unlike the also faceless subject/object of Etant Donnés, and perhaps casting a strange sort of multiply refracted light on that work, Babitz has a voice. She went on to design album covers (Buffalo Springfield Again, Atlantic Records, 1967), write novels (Slow Days, Fast Company: the World, the Flesh, and L.A., Alfred A. Knopf, 1977, Sex and Rage: Advice to Young Ladies Eager to Have a Good Time, A Novel, Alfred A. Knopf, 1979, L. A. Woman, Simon and Schuster, 1982), write stories (Black Swans, Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), and write essays (Eve’s Hollywood, Delacorte, New York, 1974, Two by Two: Tango, Two-Step and the L.A. Night, Simon and Schuster, 1999, and various magazine articles). She gives her account of the photographic session in “I was a Naked Pawn for Art: Being a True Account of the Day Marcel Duchamp Put the West Coast Underground on the Culture Map by Playing Chess in Pasadena with the Author, Who Was at the Moment an Unclothed Young Woman with a Lot to Learn,” Esquire, Vol. 116, No. 3

(September 1991), pp. 164-74. A much shorter version, with some additional photographs, “Marcel Prefers Nudes,” appears in Craig Krull, Photographing the L. A. Art Scene 1955-1975, Smart Art Press, Santa Monica, 1996, pp. 40-45.

Footnote Return 5. For a Man Ray photograph of a Picabia/Duchamp tableau vivant, see Hulten, 1993, pp. 140-141. See also Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, trans. Pears & McGuinness, Routledge, 1961 [the original was published in the same year as *Litterature* No. 7], 4.0311: “One name stands for one thing, another for another thing, and they are combined with one another. In this way the whole group—like a tableau vivant—presents a state of affairs.”

Footnote Return 6. My thanks to Paul-Jon Benson, Lydia Goehr, Fiona Maazel, and Leyla Rouhi.