Afterthought: Ruminations on Duchamp and Walter Benjamin

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Denise Bellon, *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp*, 1938. Estate of Denise Bellon, Paris.



Walter Benjamin in the Bibliothèque Nationale, in Paris, Spring 1937(around the time he met Marcel Duchamp).Photograph by Gisèle Freud, reproduced in Momme Bodersen, "Walter Benjamin: A Biography" (Verso, 1996), p. 234.

The elaborate subtitle of my book on Marcel Duchamp – The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction – was a fairly obvious reference to the celebrated essay by Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," published in 1936. Not only had I intended this reference, but by having written "The Art of Making Art," I wanted the repetition of words to emphasize the theme of reproduction, one that I felt was at the core of Duchamp's

work, while, at the same time, central to the subject of Benjamin's essay. Logical though this approach may have seemed to me at the time, in retrospect, I now realize that it was somewhat misleading. To some, the title may have suggested that my book was heavily dependent on theory, which, in actual fact, could not be further from the truth. I consider myself a contextualist, that is to say, an art historian whose sole goal is to place the work of art in its proper context, within the artist's oeuvre and that of his contemporaries, as well as – and perhaps even more importantly – within the larger framework of the social, economic and cultural climate from which it emerged (the latter factor being the main reason why I brought up the subject of Benjamin in the first place).[1]

Benjamin's essay is – without doubt – the most penetrating analysis ever attempted to evaluate the effects of photography, film and the newest innovations within the print media – which he indicates are the most recent advancements in the art of mechanical reproduction – on the way in which society will come to envision the concept of originality in a work of art. He feels that these new forms of reproduction have created a sudden and undesirable break from the traditions of the past, a time-honored and respected hands-on approach to the making of art that had characterized its production from the very beginning. In emphasizing this particular point, a comparison with Duchamp's approach to mechanical reproduction might appear – at face value – perfectly legitimate. The techniques he employed, particularly in preparing reproductions for his valise, were, for the most part, methods already developed for well over a century.[2] Duchamp had a special fascination for the technique of pochoir, for example, a stenciling process whereby every image reproduced was – for all intents and purposes – an original.

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Figure 1.
From or by Marcel Duchamp or Rrose Sélavy (The Box in a Valise), 1941

Having said this, it is equally important to clarify the fact that the pochoir process is a means by which to eliminate the individuality of the artist, for if it was to be employed in any significant numbers (as was the case for the more than 300 copies of the valise; see Figure 1, then it was usually carried out by a battery of professionals who specialized in the application of this technique, craftsmen who carefully and systematically applied the colors in the fashion of an elaborate assembly line. For all intents and purposes, the process denies any possibility of expressiveness on the part of its maker, eliminating the "patte," as Duchamp called it, or artist's personal touch. From the years of his earliest mature works (ca. 1913-14), Duchamp maintained that he was devoted to "discredit[ing] the idea of the hand-made."

In essence, he wanted to operate in the fashion of a machine, for he wished "to wipe out the idea of the original, which," he later explained, "exists neither in music, nor in poetry: plenty of manuscripts are sold, but they are unimportant. Even in sculpture, the artist only contributes the final millimeter; the casts and the rest of the work are done by his assistants. In painting, we still have the cult of the original."[3] In effect, then, Duchamp strove to eliminate the

aura intrinsic to an original work of art, a position that certainly would have placed him in opposition to Benjamin, who – as a result of its mechanical replication – considered this particular aspect of art its most endangered feature.

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Figure 2. Handcolored photograph of the ‘Large Glass’ incorporated in the limited edition of ‘Sur Marcel Duchamp’ by Robert Lebel, 1958. (inscribed lower right in white ink: MARCEL COLORIAVIT)

It is my contention that Duchamp used the pochoir process because he wanted his paintings to be reproduced in color and – at that point in time – color photography was simply not sufficiently developed to accurately record the subtle nuances of color and tonal gradations in a painting. During the summer of 1935, when Duchamp was gathering photographs for his valise, Walter Arensberg wrote to explain that "the truest color notation can be obtained from a black and white photograph hand colored by some specialist who does work for floral catalogues."[4] Indeed, the hand-coloring process was one Duchamp would employ throughout his career, inscribing these works in Latin: "Marcel coloriavit," (see Figure 2)to indicate that he had himself applied the color. Once the technique of color printing achieved the results he sought, however, he did not object to its usage; in the early 1960s, for example, he added twelve new printed color reproductions to his valise, images that he must have felt adequately reflected the paintings and sculptures they represented.

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Figure 3. *Nude Descending a Staircase*, December 1937, pochoir-colored reproduction with attached postage stamp

The ultimate problem with my pairing of these two great thinkers (Duchamp and Benjamin) is that the profound implications of Benjamin's writings are unintentionally obfuscated when we attempt to integrate them with Duchamp's equally-profound concept of the readymade, of which, we can be reasonably safe in assuming, Benjamin had no knowledge. Although we now know that Duchamp and Benjamin met on at least one occasion (in a café in Paris a year after Benjamin's essay had been published), it is doubtful that the readymade would have been one of the issues they discussed. The subject of reproduction may very well have come up, however, since Duchamp showed him a pochoir of his Nude Descending a Staircase (see Figure 3), which Benjamin noted, was "breathtakingly beautiful, maybe mention…"[(5)] It is tempting to speculate that Benjamin might have found this particular reproduction possessed with a quality (an aura) that he had only previously associated with original works of art. Could it have been – as I speculated in the introduction to my book – that in having written "maybe mention," Benjamin might have intended to take this fact into consideration in a possible future revision of his essay on mechanical reproduction? This, of course, is a question that cannot be answered, for the essay was never revised, and Benjamin died three years later (fearing possible deportation, he committed suicide at the beginning of the war).

The issues Benjamin addresses in his essay are, admittedly, somewhat difficult to grasp, due in part to a circuitous

method of reasoning that, in a relentless attempt to explicate every point he brings up, inevitably loses sight of its subject. The intellectual gymnastics are, nevertheless, a feat to behold, and well worth the process of engagement, although I am still convinced that the ultimate conclusion he draws – that the aura of a original work of art "withers" as a result of its reproduction – is inherently flawed. In a long footnote to my text, I refer readers to the opinions of Benjamin's contemporaries and a number of subsequent writers who were critical of his theory. Unknown to me at the time, however, was an excellent analysis of Benjamin's essay by Jacquelynn Baas, who not only challenges the wholesale acceptance of Benjamin's theories by present-day critics, but in a careful reading of the text, she finds serious flaws with the theory itself. "The aura or perceived potency of presence of the art object is seemingly enhanced," she concludes, "not diminished, in 'the age of mechanical reproduction.'"[6]

This is precisely the conclusion I came to. Moreover, in spite of the theoretical shortcomings I have acknowledged, I remain convinced that if one reads Benjamin's essay with Duchamp's concept of the readymade in mind, the issues he addresses are contradicted throughout the text. But, again, we could argue that this is not what Benjamin had in mind. Yet there is no question that, in emphasizing various techniques of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin believed he had identified the source of a phenomenon that was then in the process of transforming the very nature of art. Indeed, his essay begins with a long quote from the writings of Paul Valéry (1871-1945), a French poet and essayist whose writings Benjamin greatly admired. "We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts," wrote Valéry, "thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art." What contributed more to altering "our very notion of art" in this century, we might well ask, than the readymade, a concept that has revolutionized the very way in which we think about art and

the art making process?

Notes

* Francis M. Naumann, *Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Ghent: Ludion Press, 1999); distributed in the United States by Harry N. Abrams (French edition by Hazan, Paris; Dutch edition by Fonds Mercator, Antwerp)

Footnote Return 1.The inspiration for this critique came from a review by Mark Daniel Cohen of two exhibitions that I organized to coincide with the release of my book: “Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Achim Moeller Fine Arts, October 2, 1999 – January 15, 2000, and “Apropos of Marcel: The Art of Making Art After Duchamp in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Curt Marcus Gallery, October 8 – 30, 1999 (Review, October 15, 1999, pp. 38-40). It should be noted that Cohen’s criticism was aimed at my exhibitions and not the book (which, at the time of his writing, he had not yet seen).

Footnote Return 2.To give credit where credit is due, this point was first brought to my attention in 1991 by Jan Ceuleers, a Belgian writer with whom I discussed the approach I had

planned for my book on Duchamp. It is with regret that I did not discuss this particular aspect of Duchamp's work at greater length in my text, for it would have strengthened a rapport with Benjamin's theories, thereby better justifying the subtitle I had chosen.

Footnote Return 3. Otto Hahn, "Passport No. G255300," *Art and Artists* (London), vol. I, no. 1 (July 1966), p. 10.

Footnote Return 4.Walter Arensberg to Marcel Duchamp, September 1, 1935 (Duchamp Archives, Philadelphia Museum of Art); quoted in Naumann, Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art, p. 127.

Footnote Return 5. Duchamp's meeting with Benjamin was noted in the latter's diary and is cited in Ecke Bonk, "Delay Included," in Joseph Cornell / Marcel Duchamp In Resonance, exh. cat., The Menil Collection and the Philadelphia Museum of Art (New York: D.A.P., 1998), p. 102. Although Duchamp and Benjamin met in the spring of 1937, the finished pochoir of the Nude Descending a Staircase is dated "December 1937." The time discrepancy is probably a result of the fact that all of the pochoirs in the series had not yet been completed, and it is likely that Duchamp awaited their return before signing and dating the entire series.

Footnote Return 6. Jacquelynn Baas, "Reconsidering Walter Benjamin: 'The Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in Retrospect," in Gabriel P. Weisberg and Laurinda S. Dixon, eds., The Documented Image: Visions in Art History (Syracuse University

Press, 1987), p. 346; I am grateful to Linda Henderson for having drawn this essay to my attention. For the footnote in my text, see p. 24, note 6.

Fig.1~3 © 1999 Succession Marcel Duchamp, ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris.