As we approach both the fiftieth anniversary of Marcel Duchamp’s death and the centenary of his most famous “readymade” it would appear that not a lot more can be said about the man and his work. And yet, most scholars would agree that, since Duchamp’s passing and the subsequent emergence of the enigmatic Étant Donnés, the reception of his oeuvre has become highly problematized. As Benjamin Buchloh notes in one of the most recent publications directly addressing this issue, the “near total silence” which has surrounded Étant Donnés attests to the fact that Duchamp’s oeuvre has “fallen short of its actual historical potential.”

In an effort to break this silence and move beyond the impasse in question, many scholars have taken Étant Donnés as a point of departure for the reassessment of the Duchampian project. Through the peephole, this re-reading has involved an assessment of the erotic dimension of Duchamp’s work, primarily on the basis of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Some of the most important research in this area has been undertaken by two of the most prominent scholars in the field, Thierry de Duve and Rosalind Krauss. Krauss, for her part, was one of the first to explore the precise connections between Lacan and Duchamp when, in a chapter entitled “Notes on the Index” from her seminal 1986 work The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths, she uses Lacanian theory to unlock the mysteries of the Large Glass. First, she develops Lacan’s notion of the “mirror stage”: how the “child’s self-identification through his double” allows for the movement from “a global undifferentiated sense of himself towards a distinct, integrated notion of selfhood.” She then uses this
concept to read the *Large Glass* as a “‘split self-portrait” which – through the emphasis placed on certain syllables in the title *La MARiée mise à nu par ses CELibataires, même* – displays a “self-projected as double.”(3)

This analysis is extended further in her 1994 work, *The Optical Unconscious*, where she again differs to Lacan – through reference, this time, to his “L schema” apparatus – in order to put forward an “alternative” reading of modernism.(4) Indeed, it is not difficult to recognize the Lacanian co-ordinates which frame Krauss’s thesis regarding *Etant Donnés*: that, at the peephole, “vision is demonstrably hooked up to the mechanism of desire” so that the viewer as voyeur becomes a “carnal being trapped in the searchlight of the Other’s gaze […] a self that exists on the level of all other objects of the world.”(5) It is ultimately by recourse to Lacanian theory that she can argue that, in the Duchampian field, “nothing […] breaks the circuit of the gaze’s connection to its object or interrupts the satisfaction of its desire.”(6)

In his 1991 work *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, Thierry de Duve calls for a parallel approach to the relationship between psychoanalysis and art history – what he terms a “heuristic parallelism”(7) – which uses Lacanian theory to read the work of art in terms of dream analysis. First, he examines how the development of Lacan’s conceptual apparatus takes place through a close reading of Freud’s approach to dream analysis. From this theoretical standpoint, de Duve then interrogates Duchamp’s *oeuvre* using the Freudian method, arguing that Duchamp discovered “a truth that has long been familiar to psychoanalysis,” namely, that “the practice of painting has something to do with sublimation.”(8) Like Krauss, de Duve does not attempt to hide the fact that his analysis of Duchamp is supported by Lacan’s conceptual apparatus, declaring that
Duchamp’s “definition of the Real was strictly that of Lacan.”

(9)

One can conclude, then, that Krauss and de Duve’s respective readings of Duchamp’s work are governed by a common grounding in Lacan’s conceptual apparatus. However, it should be remembered that, as with the history of psychoanalytic studies of art, there is also a long and well-established tradition of psychoanalytic interventions into the Duchampian field, of which Krauss and de Duve’s Lacanian stances are simply the most recent examples. As Paola Magi has recently noted, the range of perspectives which make use of psychoanalysis in assessing Duchamp’s work is wide and varied: from Lebel’s brief intimations on the possible connection between the clinical setting and the Large Glass, to Schwartz’s thorough examination of the libidinal forces at work in Duchamp’s oeuvre, to the different interpretations put forward by Ulf Linde, Maurizio Calvesi, and Octavio Paz. (10)

A surprising omission from this list is the name of Jean Francois Lyotard, whose 1977 work Les Transformateurs Duchamp, written at a pivotal moment during the rediscovery of Duchamp’s work in France, paved the way for all subsequent appraisals of Duchampian eroticism. (11) Of course, one should also make reference to the many rigorous interpretations of Duchamp’s work offered by Lacanians themselves: for example, Jean Copjec’s suggestion that Duchamp may have in some way understood the aesthetic object as a form of sublimation; (12) or Badiou’s recent claim that the psychoanalytic aspect of Duchamp’s work is “another story” which “is probably the contradictory destiny of the most important part of modern art.” (13)

What, in my view, separates Krauss and de Duve from other scholars in the field is the extent to which they have applied Lacanian theory to Duchamp’s work; they have, I would argue,
gone the furthest in integrating Lacan’s conceptual model into the field of Duchamp Studies, as an established methodological tool. The necessary predominance of this specific Lacanian line of enquiry was given an increased level of credibility in 1987 when, to mark the one hundredth anniversary of Duchamp’s birth, the Philadelphia Museum of Art reissued the Bulletin that had been devoted to Étant Donnés in 1969. It was this publication which, by foregrounding the connection between Duchamp’s final work and a series of preparatory etchings produced in 1968 entitled The Lovers, caused the Lacanian connotations in Étant Donnés to reverberate. It was firstly deemed to be highly significant that one of the sketches was taken directly from Gustave Courbet’s 1861 painting Woman with White Stocking. Even more important, however, was the fact that another seemed to directly indicate the influence of Courbet’s L’Origine du Monde – a painting which, at the time Duchamp was working on the etchings, was in the possession of none other than Lacan himself. The significance of this curious set of circumstances was again underlined as recently as 2009 when, in the catalogue released to mark the fortieth anniversary of the Étant Donnés installation in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the precise nature of the link between Duchamp, Courbet, and Lacan was further clarified. According to Michael Taylor, Duchamp most likely saw L’Origine du Monde in late September 1958, “when he and his wife were invited to dine with the Lacans at their apartment at 3 rue de Lille in Paris.” Thierry Savatier goes as far as to suggest that Lacan deeply admired Duchamp and that it was therefore “inconceivable that he would not have brought the painting to Paris for this important rendez-vous.”

While this new evidence adds weight to de Duve and Krauss’s Lacanian interventions, I would argue that it also brings to light a number of important questions which remain unanswered by Duchamp scholars. The first point worth noting is how the relationship between The Lovers and Étant Donnés, while
strengthening the validity of a *psychoanalytic* reading, also brings into focus the specific dilemma which art historians faced when the preparatory sketches were first discovered; namely, the fact that the direct, unambiguous reference to Courbet fundamentally undermines all the criteria according to which Duchamp’s work had for so long been judged and evaluated. How, as Calvin Tomkins asks, can we account for the fact that Duchamp was explicitly claiming as an influence over his last major work an artist who he had previously criticized “for setting art on its exclusively ‘retinal’ course’,” the very attitude against which he was seen as reacting? Krauss’s answer to this question appears insufficient since, by insisting on the distinction between the eroticism of Duchamp’s later works and the earlier “cerebral Duchamp” who rejected “the world of material sensations” in favour of “the world of ideas,” she simply holds in place the very categories which the Courbet/Lacan question forces us to re-examine. 

If we choose to interrogate this interpretative aporia a little further, we begin to see that its roots lie in the paradoxical nature of the relationship between the *Large Glass* and *Étant Donnés*, the two diametrically opposed centre-pieces of Duchamp’s visual output. For almost fifty years, scholars have struggled to adequately explain what is at stake in the overlapping dimensions of openness and closure which penetrate each work: one is a blatantly figurative installation which remains fixed at a limited viewpoint; the other is a frustratingly inaccessible form whose opacity is counteracted by its transparency, the simple fact that the viewer is free to walk around it. This obvious feature was identified by Anne d’Harnoncourt as early as 1969, a year after Duchamp’s death, in what was the first critical appraisal of the work; and yet, to this day, several issues raised by d’Harnoncourt’s initial response remain unresolved. For example, her description of *Étant Donnés* as “the alter ego of The *Large Glass*” raises a very important question for Duchamp scholars: if we are to
understand Étants Donnés as a “mise-en-scène” of the *Large Glass*’s implicit “erotic content,” then how do we account for the role of the viewer-come-voyeur positioned in the space mapped by the “Glass”? If the allegorical content of the “Glass” is rendered visible in Étants Donnés – so that the “Bride” can be seen lying on a mass of twigs and the “brick base” of the “Bachelor” machine is “echoed in the inner brick wall and the outer brick doorway” – then what is the precise “allegorical” role of the viewer located at the peephole? (18)

What this apparent dichotomy leads us to is the fundamental impenetrability of the *Large Glass* itself. As Tomkins has noted, there is no getting away from the fact that, for almost one hundred years, nobody has come to fully understand the work. The reality is that, despite the transparency of its support, the forms in the *Large Glass* remain opaque: although each element has a name, it is impossible to move beyond the work’s purely formal qualities – its status as a *Large Glass* – and identify specific motifs. The “conceptual” interpretation which appears to overcome this obstacle is here undermined by Duchamp’s insistence that the *Large Glass* has “no theoretical substratum,” that “fundamentally, there are very few ideas.” (19)

If, as has been generally accepted, the Glass’s “anti-retinal” status marks it as a work of “conceptual art” then why does Duchamp continuously emphasize the importance of its formal dimension: the various “technical problems” concerning the support, the colour, the “rehabilitation of perspective” based on “dimensions,” etc.? (20) On the whole, such efforts to account for the dilemma the work presents have been undone by their own acute cynicism: despite openly dismissing as naive those readings which attempt to unlock the mysteries of the Glass, scholars continue their own efforts to excavate the secrets the work contains. The fact remains that, in the face of assertions that meaning is impossible to decipher, the *Large Glass*’s impossible status continues to exert a fascinating hold.
The basic premise of this paper – and the central argument in my doctoral thesis, *Marcel Duchamp: Resolving the Word/Image Problematic, Afterthought* – is that this set of obstacles persists because the dominant Lacanian interventions into the Duchampian field remain limited in their theoretical scope. The reason for this, I claim, is that such readings rely heavily on what Slavoj Žižek has called “the distorted picture of Lacan as belonging to the field of ‘post-structuralism’.”

Thus, my hypothesis is that, in order to answer the above questions and build on Krauss and de Duve’s work, one must continue their Lacanian analysis of Duchamp’s *oeuvre* from a Žižekian perspective. That is to say, in order to account for the fundamental lacuna in Duchamp scholarship and properly address the problematic nature of his reception, one must revisit the 1958 encounter between Lacan and Duchamp on rue de Lille with Žižek as a companion.

It is worth noting here the significance of recent remarks made by Hal Foster on the subject of Duchamp’s legacy. In an essay entitled “What’s Neo About the Neo Avant Garde” Foster appears to be one of the first scholars to advocate the need for a specific Žižekian reading of Duchamp as part of a broader *psychoanalytic* understanding of the avant-garde tradition. Through a critique of Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, he examines the paradoxical nature of the avant-garde’s reception and offers a precise description of Žižek’s revised interpretation of Lacan when he affirms the importance of “rigorous” re-readings which take the form of a “radical” return. The problem with this approach, I claim, is that it does not perform the particular reading it calls for: by narrowing his focus to an analysis of the neo avant-garde Foster overlooks what precisely is at stake in Žižek’s “return” to Lacan. In doing so, he obscures the precise “symptomatic” nature of the avant-garde tradition in general and Duchamp’s “readymade” in particular.

In order to address this limitation I will engage in a
Žižekian reading of Duchamp that accounts for the revolutionary nature of Žižek’s re-reading of Lacan. The aim, in short, is to bring together Duchamp with Lacan via Žižek: to re-habilitate the psychoanalytic core of Duchamp’s work by re-examining it through the prism of Žižek’s revised interpretation of Lacanian theory: namely, his attempt to articulate how Lacanian theory, rather than belonging to the tradition of post-structuralist thought, represents a “radical break” with this tradition and as such should be viewed as one of the most “radical contemporary versions of the Enlightenment.” \(^{(23)}\)

At the same time, this revised Lacanian reading of Duchamp sets the scene for an important encounter, over the Lacanian threshold, between Duchamp and Žižek. Not only does Žižek allow Duchamp’s work to become readable in a new and interesting way, his conceptual apparatus also re-coordinates the parameters of the Duchampian field, redefining them for the concerns of visual culture in the twenty-first century. In short, Duchamp’s work begins to operate as a crucial iconological tool in a re-defined critique of ideology; a matrix enabling us to locate contemporary ideological phenomena operating on the visual (aesthetic-iconological) plane. This may have important implications for avant-garde scholarship in particular and the discipline of art history as a whole: a reading of Duchamp (via Žižek) on the basis of Lacanian theory opens up a radical revision of the historical avant-garde in which an alternative understanding of modern art becomes possible. One is thus directly responding to Alain Badiou’s assertion on the urgency of telling “another story” about the work of Duchamp in order to re-engage with “the most important part of modern art.” \(^{(24)}\) What this “other story” both entails and engenders is a re-habilitation of art history to its psychoanalytic foundations and, ultimately, the emergence of a new mode of disciplinary exchange which moves beyond the “parallel” approach offered by Thierry de Duve. \(^{(25)}\)
With regard to the broader implications of these claims, the current paper should be viewed as the first step in contributing to a paradigmatic shift in the field of Duchampian scholarship, an effort to bring about what Žižek has defined as a Copernican revolution: instead of seeking to overcome the persistent obstacles which Duchamp’s work continues to present by “adding complications and changing minor premises”.\(^{(26)}\) Within the terms of the established interpretative framework, I am calling for a fundamental change in the foundations of this basic framework itself, a new paradigm of Duchamp studies which fully recognizes the revolutionary kernel of his work. \(^{(27)}\) Through Žižek, Duchamp’s oeuvre will be opened up to a Lacanian-Hegelian heritage where – against the standard “post-structuralist,” “postmodern” (“conceptual”) reading of his work – he is located in a lineage of rationalism alongside figures such as Kant, Hegel, Freud, and Marx. It is only in this way that the deafening silence surrounding the man and his work can be shattered so that, to the sound of broken Glass, the emancipatory potential of his project can become fully realized.

_Two sides of a Coke ad: The Duchampian title and the Lacanian signifier._

When searching for a place to begin such a radical re-thinking of Duchamp’s project it helps to consider Duchamp’s own point of departure, the genesis of his major work _The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even._ “It’s not the bride itself,” he famously declared, “it’s a concept of a bride that I had to put on the canvas one way or another, _but it was more important that I should have thought of it in words, in terms of words, before I actually drew it._”\(^{(28)}\) With this statement, Duchamp reminds us that the Large Glass’s impenetrability is rooted firmly in a distinct and original use of language: the indecipherable nature of the allegory the Glass is said to represent, namely, the story of “The Bride Stripped Bare by
Her Bachelors.” Although acknowledged as the tale of an erotic encounter, the extremely cryptic nature of the hand-written notes through which the story itself is told ensures that a clear reading is always blocked. Thus, given that a full understanding of the visual dimension of Duchamp’s work is not complete without unlocking the meaning of these notes — or, more specifically, by identifying their precise signifying logic, what Charles Cramer has loosely defined as a particular Duchampian “syntax” — it is here that the focal point of this paper resides. (29)

Our analysis of the visual dimension of Duchamp’s oeuvre will therefore begin by focusing on the system of language that supports it. Adding an increased theoretical rigour to Cramer’s analysis, my basic thesis is that the notes are the most complex and extreme form of what Žižek terms the “poetic act of naming,” an elaborate system of metaqua signifier associations rooted in a fundamental psychoanalytic understanding of language. In what remains of this paper, I will argue that, in his use of words, Duchamp literally follows the basic rule of psychoanalysis to the letter (à la lettre) in Žižekian terms, he grounds “the irreducible gap between the enunciated content and the act of enunciation that is proper to human speech.” (30)

Or, to Duchamp’s own words, he gives palpable presence to the “art-coefficient,” the “gap […] between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.” (31)

Of the many statements Duchamp makes on the subject of language, one of the more curious was offered in the recently published “afternoon interviews” with Calvin Tomkins. Discussing how a painting comes to acquire a mystical aura, he explains that “an object is an object, a three-dimensional form, but words are taken and repeated.” (32) Duchamp then elaborates on his point by drawing on an example from the world of advertising: “Like publicity. All along it’s the same
thing, “Coca-Cola, Coca-Cola.” After a while magic appears around Coca-cola [...] maybe in fifty years, if nobody speaks of Coca-Cola again, it will disappear.” (33) It is with this strange analogy that one begins to notice an interesting overlap between Duchamp and Žižek. The first point worth noting is how, with these comments, Duchamp returns to a point made in an earlier interview undertaken fifty years after the rejection and subsequent celebration of his *Nude Descending a Staircase*. In conversation with Francis Steegmuller, he declared that, if the painting’s “infamy” has lasted fifty years, then “there’s more to it than just the scandal.” When pressed to elaborate (“what else is there?”) he responds as follows: “There’s It” – “It?” – “It. Whatever has no name.” (34) Further contextualization of this point can be found in his assertion that the “Nude” scandal was ultimately rooted in a basic misunderstanding on the part of his colleagues (and brothers) in the Puteaux group of the painting’s title. In another statement focusing on the central issue in question, Duchamp explains that “they thought it was too much of a literary title, in a bad sense—in a caricatural way.” (35) It is the same misunderstanding, he maintains, which contributed to the subsequent scandal the work provoked at the New York Armory Show in 1913: “what contributed to the interest provoked by that canvas was its title.” (36) In short, one can conclude that, by referring to a Coke ad in order to demonstrate the general function of language in sustaining the aura surrounding the work of art, Duchamp is effectively highlighting the specific role of the title in his own work.

The crucial point is that, in one of those unique intellectual analogies which have become the hallmark of his *Writings*, Žižek also uses an advertisement for Coca-cola to elucidate his own particular theoretical understanding of language. In doing so, his analysis displays a striking overlap with Duchamp’s comments: from his Lacanian perspective, the “magic” described by Duchamp is articulated as an effect of the act of
naming whereby the “‘spirit of America’ (the cluster of features supposed to express it)” is “condensed in Coke as its signifier, its signifying representative.” Furthermore, Duchamp’s specific reference to the “it” which persists in the “Nude” – the “whatever has no name” – is formulated by Žižek as the “impersonal it” or surplus-X of the commodity-form, that “unattainable something” which is “in Coke more than Coke.” (37)

The Coke ad can therefore be viewed as the point at which an encounter between Žižek and Duchamp might be said to take place: for Duchamp, the ad demonstrates the particular status of titles in his work and the more general function of language in relation to the work of art; for Žižek, it is used to exemplify the Lacanian logic of the signifier and show how it diverges radically from post-structuralist theory. It is through the coke ad, then, that it becomes possible to undertake a new reading of Duchamp’s titles on the basis of Žižek’s re-reading of Lacan’s conceptualization of language. Conversely, by further exploring the implications of this overlap one engages in a psychoanalytic reading of Duchamp’s oeuvre which functions, at the same time, as a Duchampian reading of psychoanalysis. In other words, it might be argued from a uniquely psychoanalytic viewpoint that Duchamp’s work provokes a new understanding of the signifier, a shift from a post-structuralist to a Lacanian notion which, by opening up the radical break Žižek speaks of, ultimately contributes to a re-evaluation of Lacanian theory.

The Lacanian signifier and the Žižekian name

How, then, might we draw out the Lacanian connotations suggested by this curious parallel between Duchamp and Žižek? In this section, my aim is to sketch the theoretical background to Žižek’s “Coca-Cola remarks” in order to specify where his reading of Lacan diverges from post-structuralist theorists such as Krauss and de Duve. In turn, I will use this
distinctly Žižekian perspective to offer a new way of understanding Duchamp’s use of titles. The elucidation of Žižek’s theoretical apparatus will thus be followed by a close, formal analysis of Duchamp’s work. (38)

The central argument being put forward is that Žižek’s Coca-Cola reference, by demonstrating the psychoanalytic logic of language, allows us to re-read Duchamp’s work in terms of what Žižek terms “the dogmatic stupidity” of the signifier. Žižek’s basic point is that, as a signifying structure, the advertising image is not constituted as a field of representation – it does not come to represent the “spirit of America” – until it is supplemented by the label “Coke.” It must be remembered that, as a name, the label “Coke” has no meaning; it is fundamental empty, its function is purely structural: as such, it acts as what Žižek calls a “reflexive marker” (39) or unifying feature: a registered trademark which, by supplementing the advertising image, constitutes it as a totality. It is this operation – referred to by Lacan as a “quilting” process – which allows the interplay between visual-verbal elements to generate the ad’s central message.

This occurs when the empty label “Coke” acquires the status of a sign: that is, it comes to explicate the meaning generated by the advertisement. The shift from empty name to sign takes place through a simple inversion whereby “coke” comes to designate the field it supplements; that is to say, the question “What does ‘Coke’ mean?” is given an answer: “Coke is [‘the Spirit of America’].” The process is complete when the sign “Coke” becomes a signifier, a stand-alone label with its own significance: when “Coke” takes the place of the advertising image by functioning as a metaqua signifierreplacement for its central message. In other words, the sentence “Coke is [‘the spirit of America’]” simply shifts to “this object—a Glass bottle or red tin can—is ‘the spirit of America’ [because it is a bottle/can of Coke].”
The crucial point worth emphasizing is that, as a signifier, the label “Coke” does not represent or bring to mind the concept created by the ad: despite its apparent wealth of significance – its status as a signifier – it remains an empty name or trademark which, through a metaqua signifier operation, simply stands in for the concept it is seen to “represent”; in this sense, the ad should simply be understood as the “missing representation” whose place is held by the label inscribed on the tin can or Glass bottle. It is this shift in perspective which allows us to grasp Žižek’s basic argument: the signifier does not designate an object from a distance (or, the label “Coke” does not point to the contents of the Glass bottle or tin can); rather, it is inscribed into the object, onto its surface, as the empty name holding the place of the missing representation (the advertisement).

This is what Žižek means by the “dogmatic stupidity” of the signifier: the fact that a name is no more than a tautological, performative element which, rather than calling to mind a particular signified-idea, represents its lack. What conceals the signifier’s “stupidity” is a fundamental formal inversion, a reversal in causality, through which the object-referent is misrecognized as containing the signified content designated by its name: the red can or Glass bottle is believed to contain a set of particular properties because it is a can or bottle of Coke; in short, the object is viewed as the physical embodiment of the “spirit of America”. This is what Lacan termed the retroactive production of meaning: the way the missing representation – the advertising image and all the significance it carries – magically “stays behind” in the object as its “immanent essence,” as the impersonal “it,” that magical aura which cannot be named because it is merely an effect of naming.

It is the “dogmatic stupidity of the signifier,” Žižek maintains, that is overlooked in the post-structuralist
conception of language. In Žižek’s reading, the post-structuralist perspective makes two basic theoretical claims. The first assertion is that “the relation of the subject to the world of objects is mediated through language” and, consequently, the objective world is no more than the “imaginary effect-illusion of the signifier’s play” which must therefore be abandoned to the “infinite self-interpretive play of language.”

This “self-referential” conceptualization of language, Žizek argues, is based on a clearly defined theory of the signifier: that language is “the place of auto-reflexive movement” in which metonymy is given “logical predominance” over metaphor. Thus, in the post-structuralist reading, the signifying chain functions, at its most fundamental level, as a “decentered network of plural processes” in which meaning is constantly sliding along the signifying chain.

According to Žižek, it is on the basis of this particular understanding of language that Derrida criticizes Lacan for giving primacy to metaphor over metonymy. For Derrida, Lacan localizes the central lack in the signifying chain in a single (Master) element thereby stemming the differential flow which corrupts the closed nature of the signifying field. For Žižek, this critique betrays a misunderstanding of the notion of Lacan’s notion of the signifier: how, for Lacan, the signifier does not represent a lack but incarnates – takes the place of – a lack. Žižek’s point is that such an understanding of the signifying process, by giving primacy to the metonymical relations between signifier, misreads the distinctly metaqua signifierstatus of the signifier as defined by Lacan. It is for this reason that Žižek insists on the distinction between the post-structuralist understanding of the signifier and the psychoanalytic version put forward by Lacan. While the Derrida’s conceptualization of language remains rooted in the Saussurean tradition, Lacan’s represents a radical break with this tradition: it inverts the fundamental principles of
Saussure’s semiotics by submitting them to a Freudian reading.

It is this precise theoretical error which, I claim, Krauss and de Duve fall victim to in their “Lacanian” interrogations of Duchamp. While both thinkers claim to use the Lacanian notion of the signifier to examine Duchamp’s Writings, it is clear that their analysis is based on a post-structuralist mis-reading of Lacan. Krauss, by equating the Lacanian signifier with Jakobson’s concept of the “shifter,” over-simplifies Lacan’s radical Freudian interpretation of linguistic theory. The result is a distinctly Derridean reading of Lacan in which Duchamp’s notes are seen to display a “strategy of infecting language itself with a confusion in the way that words denote their referents”; in line with the self-referential conception of language, she argues that the notes “upset the balance of meaning” through an “outrageous formalism” which, by causing confusion, grounds the logic of the shifter such that “form begins to erode the certainty of content.”

De Duve, as I have noted, examines Lacan’s theory of the signifier through a close reading of Freud’s dream analysis in order to argue that, in his titles, Duchamp’s “definition of the Real was strictly that of Lacan.” The problem is that this thesis is rooted in what Žižek calls “a fundamental theoretical error” regarding the analysis of dreams. In mapping the structure of a dream onto a work of art de Duve overlooks Freud’s basic point: that the “essential constitution of the dream” is not its “latent content” but the mechanism of displacement and condensation which transforms this content into “the form of the dream.” As a consequence, his analysis obscures the psychoanalytic dimension of Lacan’s theory of the signifier, as it is articulated by Žižek, thereby overlooking what is at stake in Duchamp’s titles.

On the whole, it would appear that de Duve’s particular
understanding of the Lacanian signifier is governed by the very formal inversion which, according to Lacan, conceals its true workings. For example, from the assertion that the word assumes its fundamental form “when the signifier has no other signification than its own being as a signifier” \(^{(49)}\) we can see that the basic (Saussurean) notion of the signifier is retained; in other words, de Duve’s reflexive recognition of the signifier’s status \textit{qua signifier} (that the signifier \textit{signifies itself}) is supported by the assumption that the signifier is a material representative of a signified-idea (that it signifies). Beneath his claim that language is reduced to a basic “zero-degree” level of “nothingness,” to “the realm of non-language,” when “words ought to ‘forget’ that they have referents,”\(^{(50)}\) it is not hard to detect the central tenant of post-structuralist theory: the notion that language is a self-reflexive system, that “there is no pure-object language.” \(^{(51)}\)

One might even go as far as to argue that, beyond Krauss and de Duve, it is the Derridean rather than Lacanian understanding of language that has served as the dominant interpretative framework through which Duchamp’s \textit{Writings} have been received. Indeed, is it not the post-structuralist conceptualization of language which, to date, has framed our understanding of the notes in Duchamp’s “Green Box”? In accordance with the theoretical principles described above, it has been widely acknowledged that the notes have a “cryptic, absurd” dimension which is rooted in the fact that they are “unanalyzable by logic.” It is assumed that the notes are “simply impossible to fathom,” that they have “no meaning whatsoever” and are simply examples of Duchamp’s humorous word-play, his ironic poeticism.\(^{(52)}\) What all of this ultimately bears witness to is the fundamental contradiction which penetrates the current state of Duchamp scholarship. To paraphrase Žižek’s words, this (post-structuralist) insistence on a type of ironic poeticism is ultimately \textit{affected}: that is,
the whole effort to reinforce the idea that Duchamp’s *Writings* are “caught in a decentered network of plural processes,” the constant attempts “to evade the theoretical form,” mask a fundamental fact: that at the root of what is being said “there is a clearly defined theoretical position which can be articulated without difficulty.”

*The Duchampian title and the Žižekian name*

How might Duchamp’s homology between the Coke and the “Nude” acquire new meaning against this theoretical background? To put the question another way, how does the overlap between Žižek and Duchamp allow us to read the Duchampian title on the basis of the Lacanian signifier? In order to closely examine the status of the title in the “Nude” – a task I have undertaken in more detail elsewhere – it is perhaps best to focus on the 1911 painting which served as its preparatory work: *Sad Young Man on a Train* (*Jeune homme triste dans un train*). The most striking aspect of this painting – a detail, it must be said, which is all too often overlooked by art historians – is the fact that “the sad young man” mentioned in the title is nowhere to be seen in the image in question. Duchamp’s reduction of the visual motif to a precise configuration of points, lines and planes ensures that the viewer inevitably struggles desperately to identify any recognizable content. He himself underlined this point when he said that “the object is completely stretched out, as if elastic” so that, in the painting, “there isn’t much of the young man, there isn’t much of the sadness, there isn’t much of anything in that painting except […] a repetition of schematic lines.”

What Duchamp achieves in this painting, I claim, is the dissolution of the illusion which conceals the true workings of the title, its true status as a (Lacanian) signifier: namely, the perspectival error according to which the title’s
representational content is (mis-)perceived as being inherent to the object (the painting). The effect of such an operation manifests itself, I would argue, in the very acute feeling of discomfort which accompanies the viewing of the work: the way the viewer, standing perplexed before an explicitly opaque surface, is forced to ask in vein: “Where is the man indicated in the title?” Indeed, is it not this very simple yet direct question which lies at the root of the art historical debate surrounding “Sad Young Man,” the continued attempts to decipher the work’s title and subject matter? What the question “where is the man on the train?” reveals is a basic misconception regarding the title’s actual function and status. In other words, the assertion made in the catalogue entry for the work, that the title expands upon “the simple description of the figure for (or of) a nude, by also designating it – as if with a subtitle – ‘Jeune homme triste dans un train’,” is made on the assumption that the title has the status of a sign; that it somehow points to (or designates) the content of the painting from an objective distance.

Could it be possible to argue, then, that many Duchamp scholars have, to date, made the same error as Duchamp’s colleagues in the Puteaux group? Just as the hanging committee misunderstood the title’s “literary” status, so too have scholars missed the basic fact that the “subtitle” Sad Young Man on a Train is not a sign at a distance from the painting but a sentence [“sad-young-man-on-a-train” or “JEUNE-HOMME-TRISTE-DANS-UN-TRAIN”] inscribed onto the surface of the picture? This alternative reading is given weight when we consider Duchamp’s decision to directly paint the name of the work in block capitals, a procedure he goes on to repeat with the “Nude” (“NU-DESCENDANT-UN-ESCALIER”) and all his subsequent works thereafter. The most explicit example of this is, of course, the sentence which Duchamp literally inscribed in black paint on the back of the lower panel of the Large
Glass: LA MARIÉE MISE À NU PAR/SES CÉLEBITAIRES, MÊME/Marcel Duchamp/1915-1923/inachevé. Through this explicit act of inscription Duchamp is doing much more than simply emphasizing the title’s role in the painting; he is foregrounding the fact that the title functions not as a sign (in the Saussurean sense) but as a type of signifying structure, a verbal inscription which is part of the picture, on the same level as the visual inscriptions. This might well have been what was meant by his insistence that “I always gave an important role to the title, which I added and treated like an invisible colour.” (59) This is also why it is Žižek who appears to offer the most precise description of the Duchampian title when he writes:

In this case the relation between the picture and its title is not the usual one whereby the title corresponds simply to what is depicted […] Here the title is, so to speak, on the same surface. It is part of the same continuity as the picture itself. Its distance from the picture is strictly internal, marking an incision into the picture. (60)

The basic point is that, in Duchamp’s titles, we encounter the Žižekian re-conceptualization of Lacan’s master signifier in its purest form. (61) Given that the title [“sad-young-man-on-a-train,” “JEUNE-HOMME-TRISTE-DANS-UN-TRAIN”] cannot be said to designate or represent the motif in question, one can logically conclude that the man on the train is the central absence around which the picture is constructed: the motif is, in Žižekian terms, the missing representation for which the title is a metaqua signifier substitute. The title is only part of the painting in so far as it fills the central hole in the painting. It should therefore be understood not as a sign but as a signifying structure – an inscription – which holds the place of that which is lacking; namely, the scene whose exclusion is the condition which constitutes the painting as a field of representation. Duchamp even suggests as much when,
in response to the question “is the man you?”, he admits that “of course the sad young man on the train is myself.” However, he immediately qualifies this statement by referring not to the painting but to “the occasion of a train trip I took from Paris to see my family in Rouen [...] in October 1911” when the idea of the painting came to him. He is here referring to the actual scene – the missing representation – which is nowhere to be seen in the work; the scene is significant because it marks the important point in Duchamp’s development: when he came upon “the idea of using the movement as one of the elements” of a painting. It is in this way that the title of the work functions as a master signifier par excellence: it does not call to mind or represent the idea of the sad young man; rather, it is inscribed into the field as the element which holds the place of that which is lacking. It is the reflexive marker which constitutes the painting as a totality (as a field of representation) by holding the place of a central void.

The “Lacanian” logic of Duchamp’s titles becomes even more evident when we consider the rapid development of his work before and during his stay in Munich. During this period, his titles clearly take on an even more explicit metaqua signifier status: “Two Nudes, One Strong and One Swift,” “The King and the Queen Traversed by Nudes at High Speed,” “The King and the Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes,” “The King and the Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes,” “Virgin No. 1,” “Virgin No. 2,” “The Passage from the Virgin to the Bride.” In this series of works, the effect produced in “Sad Young Man” is driven to its extreme limit: the fact that the motifs are nowhere to be seen merely emphasizes the workings of the title, its status as what might be (retroactively) termed a Lacanian signifier. The procedure finds its most acute formulation in Duchamp’s final work The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even: it is only when we recognize that the name “Bride” clearly does not point to any identifiable object
in the picture (“Where is the ‘Bride’ designated by the title?”) our attachment to the “painting’s” content is disrupted and our attention is drawn to the title itself, to the act of inscription as a signifying operation. It becomes immediately clear that the word “Bride,” rather than pointing to the opaque forms in the picture, functions instead as the element holding the place of a missing representation, the central emptiness around which the picture is constructed.

The problem, however, is that this Žižekian (Lacanian) dimension of Duchamp’s work remains obscured by the fact that the current misunderstanding of the precise role and status of Duchamp’s titles is supported by a fundamental error in perspective. The viewer continues to see the title *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* as a sign designating the *Large Glass*, despite the fact that Duchamp constantly drew a division between the two. Due to an excessive investment in the work’s representational content, a belief that the signified-content produced by the workings of the title somehow persists as the intrinsic or immutable essence of the object, the true logic of the title is obscured. It is this excessive movement beyond the purely phenomenal qualities of the *Large Glass*, which accounts for the work’s magical aura, the power of fascination which, to this day, it continues to exert. By aesthetically fetishizing the object, we miss Duchamp’s basic point that “afterward there is no mystery – it’s a pure logical conclusion.”

Once again, de Duve appears to fall into this trap when, in reflexively acknowledging the role of the title, he reveals the underlying assumption supporting his argument that, rather than taking the place of what is clearly absent from the painting, the title represents a certain signified-idea. What comes to the fore in his insistence that “the woman is so obvious in Duchamp’s works, openly announced in their titles: Virgin, Bride, Stripped Bare, and so on” is, I maintain, a fundamentally post-structuralist conceptualization of language
which is completely opposed to the Lacanian position he purports to adopt. Despite claiming to read Duchamp’s work on the basis of Lacan’s notion of the signifier, it is clear that de Duve, to use Žižek’s terminology, still finds reason to retain the mask of the Saussurean sign: he sees content as that which is “announced” by the title; the title designates a “real referent”; it “expresses” and “proclaims” its signified. \(^{(66)}\)

It could be argued that Duchamp, in his efforts to foreground the status and role of his titles, was actively taking this perspectival error into account in advance. Indeed, if we focus on the evolution of the visual plane of his work, we can see how he may have been attempting to break the viewer’s excessive attachment to the object-referent (the painting): his progressive reduction of the image to no more than compositional arrangement of lines on a flat, opaque surface, is aimed at reinforcing an obstacle blocking the viewer’s engagement with representational content. However, it is also important to note how the increased distortion of the motif in Duchamp’s work runs directly parallel to an increased emphasis on the literary (metaphorical) nature of his titles. By reducing the motif to a set of opaque forms forming part of a specific point-to-point configuration, Duchamp breaks the viewer’s misplaced investment in the painting’s content; the crucial point is that he does so in order to underline the fact that the painting is a fundamentally symbolic mechanism. By staging a distortion in the field of visual representation – an obstacle between the viewer-subject and the painting-object – he draws attention to the signifying structure which supports the field itself: how, in effect, it is the workings of the title which provoke the viewer’s frantic search for an identifiable motif. It is only when we read the sentence “sad-young-man-on-a-train” that we attempt to move beyond the opacity of the work’s appearance towards what Erwin Panofksy called the world of “artistic motifs.” \(^{(67)}\)
The development of Duchamp’s style could thus be viewed as a repeated effort to reinforce this effect by reducing the operation to its fundamental structure: “reduce, reduce, reduce was my thought – but at the same time my aim was turning inward, rather than toward externals.” The point of culmination is, of course, the Large Glass where the effect is driven to its most extreme point: “And later, following this view, I came to feel that an artist might use anything – a dot, a line, the most conventional or unconventional symbol– to say what he wanted to say. The “Nude,” in this way, was a direct step to the Large Glass.” In front of the Glass we are left with no option but to subtract all excessive investment in the object’s representational content, all fascination with the work’s magical “it.” In doing so, we make the crucial step toward “regions more verbal”: we shift our perspective away from the object and towards the symbolic (“conceptual”) inscription that supports the visual (“retinal”) field.

Such a perspectival shift allows for a radical definition of Duchamp’s notion of “movement.” Consider, for instance, his strange insistence that, in “Sad Young Man,” there are “two parallel movements corresponding to each other”: “first, there is idea of the movement of the train, and then that of the sad young man.” The question which must be asked is this: why, if Duchamp is referring to the painting’s representational content, does he say that the movement of the train comes before that of the man when, normally, the identification of the motif (“man”) would logically come before that of the idea (“train”)? It is only by subtracting our fascination with the painting’s content – by giving up all attempts to identify the “man” and the “train” – that the answer becomes evident: the only conditions under which the movement of the “train” can come before that of the “man” is if Duchamp, rather than referring to the object-motif, is actually speaking about the effects of signification created by the title, the fact that,
in the chain of signifiers [“sad-young-man-on-a-train”], “train” is the last element.

From our Lacanian-Žižekian viewpoint, it is the “movement” triggered by the title – the viewer’s movement beyond the surface of the painting, his efforts to overcome the obstacle posed by the image of a figure broken into a series of converging lines – which concerns Duchamp. In other words, he is not referring to the movement of the man or the train but that of the viewer: he or she who falls into the trap (illusion) of reaching beyond the work’s physical appearance in an attempt to grasp some identifiable motif. It can thus be argued that the title generates the viewer’s movement beyond the realm of the painting’s purely formal co-ordinates, a frantic search for “movement” in the painting. (71)

Based on this revised understanding of Duchamp’s notion of “movement,” one might argue that his work gives physical form to the what Lacan termed the retroactive production of meaning: the way the signified (the meaning created by the title) “stays behind” in the object (the painting) because it is produced retroactively, created “après-coup”; that is, when the chain of (signifying) elements in the title has been supplemented, supported, and “quilted” by the intervention of an empty name. This operation becomes explicit if we focus closely on the precise working of the title in “Sad Young Man”. Note how it is only with the last word in the title (train) that the relations between the words which precede it become fixed, and meaning is retroactively produced. “Train,” in other words, plays the role of the pure signifier: the reflexive marker which supplements and unifies the series [“sad-young-man-on-a”] chain thereby constituting it as a field within which metonymical relations between words begin to operate. In other words, it is only with the last word that the relations between the words in the chain are fixed and meaning is created; it is only with the last word that the “movement” of the viewer on the visual plane is generated.
Duchamp himself suggests as much with the curious remark that “the young man is sad because there is a train that comes afterward.” The choice of the term “afterward” draws our attention to the fact that the word “train” comes after the series “sad-young-man.” This, in turn, underlines the position of the word “train” within the chain of signifiers and emphasizes the fact that meaning is produced after the sentence is unified by the last element. Similarly, in the *Large Glass* it is clear that meaning is produced retroactively; that is, when one reaches the end of the sentence. This is why it is Lacan who offers a perfect description of the work’s title through what he called “the diachronic function of this button tie” at the level of the sentence: “insofar as a sentence closes the signification with its last term, each term being anticipated in the construction by the other terms and, inversely, sealing their meaning by its retroactive effect.” In short, it is the last term – the addition of the adverb “mème” – which seals the sentence and totalizes the chain which precedes it by grounding the metonymical relations *between the words* in the chain. As with the word “train,” “mème” functions as a Lacanian signifier *par excellence*, the purest form of the “the dogmatic stupidity proper to the signifier as such.”

As Duchamp explains:

Words interested me; and the bringing together of words to which I added a comma and “even,” an adverb which makes no sense, since it relates to nothing in the picture or title. Thus it was an adverb in the most beautiful demonstration of adverblessness. It has no meaning. This “antisense” interested me a lot on the poetic level, from the point of view of the sentence….In English, too, “even” is an absolute adverb; it has no sense. All the more possibility of stripping bare. It’s a “non-sense.”

It is important here to note Duchamp’s insistence that *Sad Young Man on a Train* “already showed my intention of
introducing humour into painting, or, in any case, the humour of word play: triste, train…‘Tr’ is very important.”(76)

In Žižekian terms, the “tr” is the crucial feature which grounds the empty, self-reflexive nature of the title, the status of the title as a pure signifier. This operation reaches its most extreme point when the “tr” of train is replaced by the word “mème” and the performative, tautological dimension of the signifier, is exposed. This effort to openly stage the performative (metaphorical) and, ultimately, tautological dimension of language also gives new meaning to what Duchamp refers to as the “literary” use of the title, or the poetic use of words: “titles in general interest me a lot [...] at the time, I was becoming literary. Words interested me [...].”(77) However, he maintains that, while his work might be called “literary,” his use of words is “not entirely literary”: it was “much deeper than literary” because “it’s using words, but then everything that uses words is not necessarily literary, as you know.” (78) Duchamp was referring here to “the poetic aspect” of the words, the way in which the common assumption that a word simply pointed to an object was fundamentally challenged: “I wanted to give ‘delay’ a poetic sense that I couldn’t even explain. It was to avoid saying ‘a Glass painting,’ ‘a Glass drawing,’ ‘a thing drawn on Glass,’ you understand?”(79) For Duchamp, “poetic words” are the opposite of words which have an “essential concept”; they are, he explains, “words distorted by their sense” (80) which create “an explosion in the meaning of certain words” so that “they have a greater value than their meaning in the dictionary.”(81) What this explosion ultimately calls attention to is “the intellectual side of things,” to the symbolic-conceptual dimension of the object, to “regions more verbal.” (82)

It is at this point that the full weight of the parallel between Lacan and Duchamp is felt. What is significant is the
way Duchamp’s statements on poetry have very close resonances with Lacan’s and Žižek’s claim that the poetic act of naming ultimately displays what can, retroactively, be termed a psychoanalytic understanding of language: an attempt to name the “unnameable X” in the object through “tautological pseudo-explanations” \(^{(83)}\) which themselves ground the tautological nature of the naming process itself. Indeed, is it not a “certain systematic and deliberate use of the signifier as such” \(^{(84)}\) that becomes apparent in Duchamp’s series of puns? By reducing language to the zero-level of a tautology, does a pun not openly stage the “poetic” dimension of language, the dogmatic stupidity of the signifier?

While the answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this paper it is worth repeating that, for Lacan, the act of staging the logic of the signifier finds its purest form in the poetic act of naming. This is his point in Seminar VII when he discusses the importance of the technique adopted in the phenomenon of courtly love within the context of the psychoanalytic process. It is thus significant that Duchamp consistently relates his approach to the use of titles to the poetic tradition: “it was the poetic aspect of the words that I like […] it was really poetic, in the most Mallarméan sense of the word, so to speak.” \(^{(85)}\) The Duchampian notion of “humour” – as with the term “movement” – can thus be fundamentally redefined along Lacanian lines. Directly echoing Lacan’s description of the “amusing side” of courtly love – which “has perhaps no other cause than the semantic confusion produced’ by the use of metaphor” \(^{(86)}\) – Duchamp continuously refers to his use of titles in terms of humour: it was, he notes, “amusing to try.” \(^{(87)}\)

The crucial concluding point is that, while the encounter between Duchamp and Lacan in front of Courbet’s L’Origine du monde remains the only corroborating evidence to support the direct influence of Lacan over Duchamp and vice versa, the
fact remains that Lacan developed his theory of the signifier through an analysis of the very source from which Duchamp’s radical use of titles emerged – that is, a particular poetic understanding of language that can, after the fact, be understood through a psychoanalytic lens. From this departure point Duchamp’s oeuvre and Lacan’s theoretical apparatus open themselves up to the possibility of radical transformation whereby, to cite the mediator of the message, both thinkers “may simultaneously redeem themselves, shedding their old skins and emerging in a new unexpected shape.”(88)

Notes


4. Krauss leaves the reader with little doubt as to the extent of her debt to Lacan when, in the opening chapter of *The Optical Unconscious*, she outlines the specifics of her theoretical position. Her argument begins with the thesis that modernism is a fundamentally visual field in which the “the fundamentals of perception,” the opposition between figure/ground and not-figure/not-ground, are constantly maintained (*Ibid.*, 14). To demonstrate this point she maps the topology of modernism onto the structuralist graph developed
by the Klein Group and asks: how does one trace an “alternative history, one that had developed against the grain of modernist opticality” (Ibid., 20), one that rose out of modernism to “defy its logic”? (Ibid., 21). The task Krauss sets herself, in other words, is to trace an opposing trend in modernism, one which instead of being “contained by the terms of visual perception” (Ibid., 14) functions as a “statement of this containment” (Ibid., 15). What Krauss attempts to identify is a shift in which the opposition figure/ground is both preserved and cancelled, an inversion in the fundamentals of perception which unveils “the structure of the visual field as such” (Ibid., 15), what she calls “vision as a form of cognition” (Ibid., 16). In order to map the logic of this counterhistory, Krauss locates what she sees as its practical and theoretical poles: it is Duchamp’s decision to give up work on the Large Glass, she ventures, which indicates a possible starting point; and it is Lacanian psychoanalysis which marks a conceptual foundation. She writes: “The theorists of this refusal were Bataille and Breton, Caillois and Leiris, with in the background, Freud. And in the foreground, Dali linked through one arm and Caillois through the other, there was Lacan. Lacan, it struck me, provided the key to this refusal, a way of giving it a name” (Ibid., 22; my emphasis).

Footnote
5. Ibid., 112.

Footnote
6. Ibid., 112. Krauss’s arrives at this statement by way of supplementing the semiotic graph used by the “structuralists” with Lacan’s L schema: a model which shows the subject “as an effect of the unconscious” (Ibid., 23). This move allows Krauss to map the figure/ground axis in the visual logic of modernism onto Lacan’s conceptual categories (the ego, the object, the subject and the Other) thus providing theoretical justification for the counterhistory which frames her analysis of Duchamp’s late work. It is
Lacan’s shema, she writes, which “displays the diagonal, mirroring relationships” lacking from the structuralist graph, the co-ordinates which “map the way the ego identifies with its object.” There is, she definitively declares, “no mistaking it” (Ibid., 23).


8. De Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism*, 31. In the book’s opening chapter, which is entitled ‘Art and Psychoanalysis, Again?’ and is framed by a quotation from Lacan, de Duve presents an overview of the long tradition in psychoanalytic readings of art and asks: “of what use can psychoanalytic interpretation be in the constitution of a historical ‘narrative’ récit of art?” His response, much like that of Krauss, is clear and definite: “the time at which the question is being asked must be explicit: that time is today” (Ibid., 1). He is equally unambiguous when he explains that his attempt to bring the two “incommensurable historicites” (Ibid., 5) of art and psychoanalysis into a parallel relation – a method which, he claims, is unlike “applied psychoanalysis” and “psychoanalytic aesthetics” in that it neither presupposes a strict adherence to Freudian doctrine nor burdens itself “with any equally a priori critical suspicion” (Ibid., 7) – is made on the basis of a simple hypothesis: that the “truth-function that Duchamp’s work […] brings to light” resonates with the fundamental premises of Lacanian theory. He writes: “And behind these artistic and theoretical resonances one hears the voice of Lacan, who, more than anyone, authorized this sort of reading and established it, epistemologically. This is what interests me here. One will soon see the important place I reserve for Lacan in the exercise of parallelism that follows” (Ibid., 8-9; my
emphasis).

9. De Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism*, 78-9. He arrives at this analysis through his heuristic parallelism: an “explicit point-by-point comparison” (*Ibid.*, 67) between Duchamp’s Munich painting *The Passage from Virgin to Bride* and Freud’s famous “injection dream”. The crucial point worth emphasizing here is that this comparison relies on Lacan’s specific reading of the dream in question, such that de Duve’s interpretation of Duchamp’s work is ultimately vectored through the lens of Lacan’s conceptual categories, the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary (*Ibid.*, 69).


11. Indeed, it is to Lyotard’s topological analysis of the specular “dispositif” at work in *Étant Donnés* that Krauss refers in her own Lacanian reading of the work. Similarly, de Duve cites Lyotard’s 1969 essay on the “Principal Trends in the psychoanalytic Study of Artistic and Literary Expression” as the most recent moment of “breaching” in the history of post-Freudian aesthetics, to which de Duve responds by asking “what use can we make today of the relation of psychoanalysis to art?” Situating his own contribution within this tradition and in relation to Lyotard’s work he writes: “the method that I propose here has bully broken with an attitude of reciprocal deconstruction that characterizes the second-to-last moment of the double breaching of art and psychoanalysis, as narrated in Lyotard’s 1969 essay. If my method produces any results, they should remain valued even if a later breaching of the Freudian corpus carries the relation of art to psychoanalysis to yet unsuspected shores.” De Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism*, 2-3, 7.


23. Žižek, The Sublime Object, xxx.


27. This assertion is based on the following statement made by Žižek in the updated preface to his seminal 1989 work The Sublime Object of Ideology: “When a discipline is in crisis, attempts are made to change or supplement its theses within the terms of its basic framework – a procedure one might call ‘Ptolemization’ [...]. But the true ‘Copernican’ revolution takes place when, instead of just adding complications and changing minor premises, the basic framework
itself undergoes a transformation [...] the question to ask is always: is this truly a Copernican revolution, or merely a Ptolemization of the old paradigm?” Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, vii.


33. Ibid., 62.


38. I have elsewhere discussed how this particular aspect of Žižekian theory relates to Duchamp’s work in “*The Sublime Object of Iconology: Duchampian Appellation as Žižekian Interpellation,*” *Seachange: Art, Communication, Technology, International Online Journal* (Montreal: McGill University, 2016). I argue that a Žižekian reading of Duchamp’s titles allows us to rethink Duchamp’s *oeuvre* as a radical form of ideology critique. For the purposes of this paper, however, my intention is to elaborate a Lacanian/Žižekian reading of Duchamp’s titles in more detail, by examining them outside their broader relation to the ideological parameters of the aesthetic field. In the bibliography I have included some works by Žižek which, although not directly cited, are included because they are germane to my brother arguments concerning Duchamp’s project. It is in *The Fragile Absolute or Why is the Christian Legacy worth fighting for?* (London: Verso, 2008), for example, that Žižek makes direct reference to Duchamp in the context of a distinctly Lacanian reading of the avant-garde tradition. It is the curious nature of his assessment of Duchamp – the fact that he overlooks what, according to his own theoretical framework, he should have been able to see – which I take as a departure point for my re-reading of Duchamp. It is in this way that my Žižekian reading of Duchamp functions primarily as a Duchampian reading of Žižek, an interrogation – via the Duchampian lens – of the aesthetic-iconological foundations of
Lacanian thought, the very co-ordinates lacking from Zizek’s apparatus. A substantial elaboration of this argument is the subject of my forthcoming book entitled Duchamp with Zizek: Towards a Word/Image Parallax.


40. Žižek, The Sublime Object, 178.

41. Ibid., 113.

42. Ibid., 113. For a full elaboration of how, through Duchamp, the act of naming functions as a critique of the ideological structure of the aesthetic field see Kilroy, “The Sublime Object of Iconology” (2016).

43. Ibid., 177.

44. Ibid., 177, 172.

45. Ibid., 174, 172.


47. De Duve, Pictorial Nominalism, 78-9.


49. De Duve, Pictorial Nominalism, 125. While beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting here how
this inherent limitation in de Duve’s reading of Lacan comes to manifest itself as an obvious contradiction in his ‘parallel’ approach: the fact that his efforts to escape the ideological pitfalls of the psychoanalytic position – its status as “an indecisive and even highly troubling epistemology” (Ibid., 3) – are undermined by the indecisive and highly troubling nature of the parallel method itself. De Duve maintains his approach affords him a critical distance towards the ideological tendencies inherent in a psychoanalytic study of art: “To put the problem this way is to ask what role ideology plays in art and in psychoanalysis and to imagine that ideology varies in an inverse relation to the truth function of art and analysis” (De Duve, Pictorial Nominalism, 3). In other words, the “heuristic parallelism” provides a model which ensures that one remains “attentive to the truth-function that is at work in the two fields” (Ibid., 4). However, the very admission that “of course, as ‘parallel’ as my reading will be, I cannot help applying to Duchamp Freudian concepts (or others, Lacanian in particular)” (Ibid., 7) testifies to an obvious discrepancy between theory and practice, between what he claims to be doing and what he is actually doing. In the face of all rigorous attempts to avoid psychoanalytic essentialism, there is no getting away from the fact that he falls into the very position he seeks to escape. What this contradiction ultimately underlines is the significance of Žižek’s thesis regarding ideology, arrived at on the basis of his re-reading of Lacanian theory: that ideology functions not at the level of concepts (what people think they are doing) but in the form – or “socio-synthetic dimension” – of their activity (what they are actually doing). One might argue it is this paradox – what Žižek terms the “enlightened false consciousness” of postmodern scepticism – which governs the current paradigm in Duchamp Studies: that is to say, despite all efforts on the part of scholars to take into account “the distance between the ideological mask and the reality,” at the level of what one is doing one “still finds reason to retain the mask.” Žižek, The Sublime Object,
173-4, 15, 26, 28.

50. Ibid., 127.

51. Žižek, The Sublime Object, 177.

52. See Tomkins, Marcel Duchamp, 6, 4, 3.


54. Here I will provide a more nuanced version of the analysis of the “Nude” which appears in “The Sublime Object of Iconology” by focusing on the work that precedes it, Sad Young Man on a Train (1911).

55. Duchamp, Dialogues, 29.

56. Duchamp in Tomkins, Duchamp, 76.

57. I can claim to have had personal experience of this phenomenon when, as an intern at the museum where Duchamp’s painting is held, I was repeatedly asked the same question by perplexed visitors: “where is the man on the train?” This question serves as the departure point in the aforementioned paper, “The Sublime Object of Iconology,” when it is discussed in relation to a curious joke made by Žižek in which he demonstrates the Lacanian logic of the signifier through reference to a viewer’s experience of a painting in a gallery.

58. Angelica Zander Rudenstine, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation (New

59. Tomkins, Duchamp, 51.

60. Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 179.

61. This thesis is expanded in Kilroy, “*The Sublime Object* of Iconology” where it serves as the basis for a re-reading of Duchamp’s readymade in terms of Žižek’s revised notion of ideology.


63. Duchamp, *Dialogues*, 130.

64. Is this not his aim when splitting the work into visual and verbal poles? He writes: “I wanted the album to go with the ‘Glass,’ and to be consulted when seeing the ‘Glass’, as I see it, it must not be ‘looked at’ in the aesthetic sense of the word. One must consult the book, and see the two together. The conjunction of the two things entirely removes the retinal aspect that I don’t like. It is very logical.” Duchamp, *Dialogues*, 42-3. By continuously grounding the text-image disjunction Duchamp calls attention to the fact that the visual (“retinal”) is governed by a symbolic (“conceptual”) structure, a point which is further underlined by the distinctive way he chooses to name each work: The *Large Glass* and *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*.

65. Duchamp in Tomkins Duchamp, 211.


71. This the central claim in “The Sublime Object of Iconology”: that the “Nude” can be understood as the point where this movement becomes eroticized, when the frantic search for content becomes sexualized through the transformation of the motif from man to female object. Thus, when de Duve asserts that, with Duchamp’s Munich works, “erotic themes enter his work and never leave,” he misses the basic point that the themes in question are not “in the work” but are an effect of the title; thus, one could say that the eroticism in question is present at the very level of de Duve’s own activity: his own (mis-)recognition of erotic themes; his own movement beyond the opaque surface of the painting to the realm of representational content. See de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism*, 31.


74. Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 103.


77. *Ibid.*., 40.


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On “The Creative Act”

Julian Jason Haladyn

With art ... the finitude of the sensible material becomes a support for the production of affects and precepts which tend to become more and more eccentred with respect to preformed structures and coordinates. Marcel Duchamp declared: “art is a road which leads towards regions which are not governed by time and space.” – Felix Guattari (1)

In his polemic text “The Creative Act,” Marcel Duchamp describes the act of creating art as consisting of a dialogue between the two poles (as he terms them) of the artist – the creator of the work – and the spectator, or more generally the posterity – the person or people who experience the work. For Duchamp, both of these subject positions are necessary in order to create a work of art, which must be seen to involve not just the making of the work but also its reception. This relationship is described most clearly in the concluding paragraph of the text, where he states: “the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act” (2). This understanding of art undermines the privileged position typically accorded the artist within modernity, who is most often perceived as the singular creator or “genius” behind great works of art. By suggesting that artists actively depend on the contributions of viewers in order for their work to be completed, Duchamp directly challenges the authority of artists over their art – and, by extension, the modern conception of art based upon this vision of the “genius” artist.

At the heart of Duchamp’s short text is, I propose, a
fundamental questioning of the accepted parameters of the artist-viewer relationship that emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century with the modern conception of art and the museum. Whereas prevailing modernist theories assume the artist to be a position of privilege, marking a distinct perspective on the world that is the basic expression of their uniqueness or “genius” – a perspective that defines everything the artist produces precisely because it is produced by the artist – Duchamp’s vision of art is fundamentally based upon the relational interactions or dialogues of viewer and artwork, with the artist’s participation being mediumistic. “If we give the attributes of a medium to the artist,” he tells us, “we must then deny him the state of consciousness on the esthetic plane about what he is doing or why he is doing it” (3). Duchamp clarifies this position in an interview with Pierre Cabanne, where he states:

I believe very strongly in the “medium” aspect of the artist. The artist makes something, then one day, he is recognized by the intervention of the public, of the spectator; so later he goes on to posterity. You can’t stop that, because, in brief, it’s a product of two poles – there’s the pole of the one who makes the work, and the pole of the one who looks at it. I give the latter as much importance as the one who makes it. (4)

Rather than creating an artwork that is experienced by a spectator after it is completed, in Duchamp’s description the artist is positioned as a medium that produces works of art only with the participation of the spectator and, more important, the posterity (multiple spectators in multiple contexts) that historically recognizes the work as art. What Duchamp proposes is a dialogic artist-viewer relationship that is predicated on a psychological and affective transference, an important term he uses to describe the interaction between artist and spectator – and, in the more historical interpretation, between the past and present – through the
material presence of the art object.

The purpose of my present text is two-fold. First, to argue for the significance of “The Creative Act” within modern artistic and cultural discourse, specifically examining Duchamp’s act of defining the relational subject positions of the artist and spectator that form the basis for his theory of art – which, I propose, can be applied to a more general consideration of the psychology of modern subjectivity. Second, to analyze Duchamp’s use of the word “transference” when he defines the workings of the creative act and to situate this Duchampian transference, a psychological notion based on subjective dialogue, in relation to the psychoanalytic understanding of the term. In this way my analysis approaches “The Creative Act” psychologically, considering the text primarily as a statement on art, not as an esoteric practice or discipline but rather as the basis of and material for a continuing artistic dialogue that takes place through the artist-artwork-viewer relationship.

Creating the Creative Act

It may be helpful to begin by outlining the circumstances in which Duchamp wrote and presented “The Creative Act,” an aspect of the text that is often overlooked. As one of only a few documents in which Duchamp clearly describes his understanding of the process of creating art – one might even say his philosophy of art – it is important that we consider the (practical) development of this text especially as it relates to and even reflects his practice as an artist.

In 1957, Duchamp was invited to give a talk at the American Federation of the Arts Convention in Houston, Texas. His acceptance of this invitation was likely motivated at least in part by the fact that the exhibition Jacques Villon, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Marcel Duchamp was on view at The Museum of Fine Arts of Houston during this convention. Organized by James Johnson Sweeney, director of the Guggenheim, where the
show was first presented, this exhibition brought together works by Duchamp and his two brothers – hence, it is often referred to as the “Three Brothers” exhibition. As Calvin Tomkins suggests, Duchamp was no doubt encouraged by Sweeney and “may have felt under some obligation to help promote” the exhibition (5). The show was of considerable importance to Duchamp, who actively participated in its planning as well as the design of the catalogue. His talk would in this way greatly aid in promoting the “Three Brothers,” the opening of which (on the evening of April 3) was included on the schedule of activities for the convention (6). Duchamp presented his paper on the morning of April 5 as part of a panel discussion that included Professor William Seitz (Art History, Princeton University), Professor Rudolf Arnheim (Psychology, Sarah Lawrence College), and Gregory Bateson (anthropologist). The topic for this panel was the creative act, with the title being directly adapted by Duchamp as the title of his paper – which was published in Art News the same year.

The approach that Duchamp takes in “The Creative Act” builds upon and extends his earlier theories of the role of the artist in society that he discussed at the Western Round Table on Modern Art, which took place at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1949 (7). Duchamp proposes two key ideas during the four sessions of the roundtable.

The first is the concept of what he terms the esthetic echo, which he compares to the notion of aesthetic taste:

Taste gives a sensuous feeling, not an esthetic emotion. Taste presupposes a domineering onlooker who dictates what he likes and dislikes, and translates it into beautiful and ugly when he is sensuously pleased or displeased. Quite differently, the “victim” of an esthetic echo is in a position comparable to that of a man in love or of a believer, who dismisses automatically his demanding ego and helplessly submits to a pleasurable and mysterious constraint. While exercising his taste, he adopts a commanding attitude, when touched by the
esthetic revelation, the same man, almost in an ecstatic mood, becomes receptive and humble.... the man of taste trusts his pre-established likes and dislikes. The man who gets the esthetic shock – it’s a shock – is not master of himself. He submits and becomes humble (8).

The distinction Duchamp is suggesting between taste and the esthetic echo hinges on a question of the spectator’s subjective will, specifically whether or not an artwork is viewed passively or actively. Most people, according to Duchamp, respond to an artwork in a manner that generally conforms to preconceived interpretations, which often consist of culturally accepted opinions or shared perspectives (uncritically) reproduced by the viewer; this is what is meant by taste – which for Kant allows people a common means of judging and making communicable their subjective responses within a larger community. With taste, therefore, will is not a necessary component since one’s initial response of like or dislike is trusted. To experience the esthetic echo, however, the spectator must give up any commanding attitude over the artwork and actively be willing to engage in a dialogue with it, creating receptiveness beyond the mere apprehension of the work. Here Duchamp envisions the act of viewing as the possibility of using one’s will to create meanings that are not given.

The second major idea that Duchamp introduces at the 1949 roundtable is his belief that the artist and artwork must be treated as separate, a notion that – even after the Poststructuralist critique of the author – remains challenging to this day. Responding to a discussion about the artist’s recognition of when a work is complete, Duchamp adds: “We don’t emphasize enough that the work of art is independent of the artist. The work of art lives by itself and the artist who happened to make it is like an irresponsible medium. No artist can say at any time ‘I am a genius. I am going to paint a masterpiece.’ That is not done” (9). In this articulation of
the artist as an irresponsible medium we can see the starting point for the main themes of “The Creative Act,” in which Duchamp presents a more focused argument for the mediumistic (as he terms it) quality of the artist and, by extension, his conception of the artwork as a creative experience that is distinct from the person who created it – a distinction that he leaves for the spectator to reconcile. For Duchamp, the artist cannot be responsible for what becomes of the artwork – how it may be interpreted or understood, whether it is appreciated or not – once it is sent out into the world, not unlike the idea that a medium such as paint or marble is not responsible for a painting or sculpture produced out of its materials.

It is important to note that Duchamp’s proposed view of the artist as an irresponsible medium is not simply an abstract theory but instead emerged directly out of his own experience as an artist. As Tomkins points out, there existed for Duchamp a “notable gap between his own intentions and the end results” of his various artistic projects, the eventual significance of which, from an art historical perspective, has little to nothing to do with Duchamp’s intentions – what W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley characterize as “the intentional fallacy” (10). This gap can be seen in the events surrounding his painting Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2 (1912), which, after its scandalous success in the 1913 “International Exhibition of Modern Art” or (as it is better known) the “Armory Show” in New York City, represented a key turning point in his career. When this same painting was submitted a year before to the 1912 Salon des Indépendants it was regarded so poorly that his brothers, on behalf of the organizers, asked him to change the painting, which he instead withdrew from the exhibit – the entire demoralizing event precipitated his trip to Munich from June to October. Even after the work’s subsequent inclusion that same year in an exhibition of Cubist work at Galerie Dalmau in Barcelona and the “Section d’Or” exhibition in Paris, the painting was still not considered to
be of much artistic importance in comparison to the innovativeness of his contemporaries. The American response to *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* was a surprise to Duchamp, who would not realize his own success as an artist until his visit to New York in 1915 – a status he did not experience in France until much later and arguably never to the extent as in the United States (11). What was the difference between the painting that was “refused by the Indépendants” and “didn’t cause a stir” at Galerie Dalmau or in *Section d’Or* and the painting that became the *succès de scandale* of the *Armory Show* (12)? Through this discrepancy, Duchamp experienced first-hand how *irresponsible* his intentions as the work’s creator were in its reception.

On its most basic level, “The Creative Act” is Duchamp’s recognition and articulation of this gap between the artist’s *intentions* and the end result of the work as experienced by the spectator (and posterity). He defines the experiential discrepancy between these positions as the personal *art coefficient*, which can be seen “in the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act” in which we can witness “the relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.” He continues: “To avoid a misunderstanding, we must remember that this ‘art coefficient’ is a personal expression of art ‘à l’état brut,’ that is, still in a raw state, which must be ‘refined’ as pure sugar from molasses, by the spectator” (13). The emphasis on the spectator’s role as *refiner* of the raw artistic product of the artist serves to clarify the distinction Duchamp is highlighting, particularly in terms of understanding different receptions of a work of art by different groups of people – and, as was the case with *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, to radically different ends. (No one interpretation is correct or incorrect, according to Duchamp, although he makes it clear that posterity provides what he calls the *final verdict*.) From his own experience as an artist Duchamp recognized that judging works of art is ultimately and almost exclusively the
responsibility of the spectator, with the artist becoming a type of medium out of or through which the work is created (14). The different and even contradictory responses elicited by an artwork represent the overdetermined nature of the creative act, which, as Duchamp came to see it, necessarily involved a dialogic relationship between the artist (as medium) and spectator through the work of art.

The significance of Duchamp’s conception of the artist as mediumistic cannot in my opinion be overemphasized, especially when considered not just a theory of art but also a theoretical critique of modern notions of authorship – and the modern subject more generally. In fact, with “The Creative Act” Duchamp anticipates the Poststructuralist interrogation of the author performed most powerfully in Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” and Michel Foucault’s “What Is an Author?” (published in 1967 and 1969 respectively). Let us therefore examine “The Creative Act” in relation to two key areas of overlap: first, Barthes’ and Duchamp’s critical shifts in focus from the authority of the author to that of the reader-spectator; second, the manner in which Foucault and Duchamp divide or split the role of the “author” and “artist” (respectively) to challenge the perceived unity given to the author-artist position in modernity. In addition to explicitly connecting Duchamp’s analysis of the artist with the examinations of the author performed by Barthes and Foucault, an important goal of this comparison is to locate Duchamp’s ideas within the larger critical investigation of the author question that pervades twentieth century discourse, a category of inquiry in which (surprisingly) “The Creative Act” is not typically examined.

**The Birth of the Reader-Spectator**

In “The Death of the Author,” Barthes questions the significance of the author’s role in understanding or approaching a text. His critique focuses on the manner in which the author is used as a given in the reading of a text,
treated as the natural origin or source that the reader is supposed to uncover in order to experience the “true” meaning of the work. “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing,” Barthes tells us (15). Earlier in the essay he notes that this overt focus on the author as a key interpretive position is a distinctly modern way of examining texts, pointing to (but not explicating) the history of interpretation that pre-dates the nineteenth century. M. H. Abrams describes this development in his influential *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*:

The pragmatic orientation, ordering the aim of the artist and the character of the work to the nature, the needs, and the springs of pleasure in the audience, characterized by far the greatest part of criticism from the time of Horace through the eighteenth century. Gradually, however, the stress was shifted more and more to the poet’s [author’s] natural genius, creative imagination, and emotional spontaneity, at the expense of the opposing attributes of judgment, learning, and artful restraints. As a result the audience gradually receded into the background, giving place to the poet himself, and his mental powers and emotional need, as the predominant cause and even the end and test of art. (16)

It is this shift of orientation from audience to author that Barthes objects to, proposing a form of reversal in which it is the author who is required to recede into the background of a text, giving place to the audience or reader as the predominant cause and even the end and test of art. Or, as Barthes dramatically proclaims in the final statement of his essay, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author” (17).

In spite of the forcefulness of his title, the main target of Barthes’ critique is not strictly speaking the role of the “author” (as writer or creator of a text) – a role that he
necessarily participates in and even celebrates and enjoys throughout his writing – but rather with the excessive privileging of the author’s authority over the text. At no point is this “death” equated with the elimination or disappearance of the author position, in theory or practice; what disappears is the privileged autonomy associated with the role of the author in modernity. Barthes replaces the designation “author” with what he terms the scriptor, which, although it excludes the “passions, humours, feelings, impressions” – that is, the personal or subjective qualities of the writer – typically associated with the Romantic vision of the author (as genius or author-god), still maintains a similar position in relation to the text (18). Even a cursory examination of his substitution of “scriptor” for “author” demonstrates this overlap since, quite literally, scriptor is the Latin word for a writer, scribe, or author; beginning in his 1953 Writing Degree Zero, Barthes uses this alternative categorization to describe the act of writing in which the writer can no longer claim presence within what is written. He is therefore not removing or killing the author, as commentators often claim (19), but instead is proposing an understanding of authorship that is again more akin to a pre-nineteenth century orientation that privileges the reader’s relation to the text. In the most extreme interpretation, Barthes’ scriptor is an author reduced to the function of a scribe or copyist that merely re-produces texts by drawing upon an immense dictionary of existing or ready-made cultural material, as a result of which there is no claim to personal expression or originality.

Here we can see a direct parallel between Barthes’ conception of the author as scriptor and Duchamp’s description of the artist as medium. In both cases there is an active de-privileging of the modernist authorial relation between the author-artist and their work, which is replaced by a renewed focus on the reader-spectator’s authority in disentangling, making sense of and even completing the text. This is made
clear by Duchamp’s assertion that the spectator contributes to the creation of a work of art by interpreting its inner qualifications; and by Barthes, who in S/Z states: “What is at stake in literary work (in literature as work) is making the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of a text” (20). For Duchamp and Barthes the role of the reader-spectator is vital to addressing the author question, the critical evaluation of which depends upon understanding a text not just as the product of an author-artist but also, and more important, as a social space or language (textual or visual) that invites engagement (present and future).

The specific position granted the reader-spectator in relation to the text, however, is quite different in each of their two accounts. On the one hand, Duchamp argues that the spectator (or posterity) is responsible for the final evaluation and interpretation of what an artist creates, locating spectators within the creative process by making them the determining factors – particularly through the shared experience of multiple spectators – in the social and historical constitution of a work of art. As he states: “The creative act takes another aspect when the spectator experiences the phenomenon of transmutation; through the change from inert matter into a work of art, an actual transubstantiation has taken place, and the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the aesthetic scale” (21). The power of the Duchampian spectator is in this way directly based upon an aesthetics of subjective judgment, with individual spectators being called upon to interpret and share what they experience. On the other hand, Barthes clearly disavows the manifestly subjective aspects of the reader (as person) and instead proposes the birth of a position that quite literally structures the received text, which is experienced most fully by readers who deny their own (as well as the author’s) pathological interest in order to engage with the text in itself. According to Barthes:
The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. (22)

Barthes’ reader occupies the fundamental position in which the multi-dimensional aspects of a text are given unity, the result not of an individual reader’s subjective experience but rather the act of being the text’s destination. The distinction between “The Death of the Author” and “The Creative Act” can in this way be summed up as follows. While Barthes depersonalizes the role of the reader-spectator, which he declares is without history, biography and most significantly psychology, Duchamp celebrates the subjective abilities of reader-spectators to engage in a personal dialogue with a text, deciphering it through acts of individual judgment.

On an historical level, it is important to acknowledge the fact that “The Death of the Author” was first published in the 1967 double issue of the American journal Aspen, no. 5/6, designed and edited by Brian O’Doherty. In place of a traditional bound publication, O’Doherty produced a white box containing a series of loose texts (in the most general sense of the term), a format that, as he – or, more accurately, his pseudonym Sigmund Bode – writes, “constitutes a test for the reader” (23). Translated into English by Richard Howard, Barthes’ text was printed as an eight-inch square pamphlet that also included essays by George Kubler and Susan Sontag. While planning Aspen, no. 5/6, O’Doherty contacted Barthes about contributing to the project:

Barthes was in Philadelphia at that time and he came to New York to talk about the project. He got it immediately. My notion that art, writing etc., was produced by a kind of anti-
self that had nothing to do with whoever “me” was, an excellent preparation for our conversation. He said “I think I may have something for you.” When “The Death of the Author” arrived, I knew it was revolutionary. (24)

Written (at least in part) for Aspen, no. 5/6 – with the more often cited French version appearing the following year in the journal Mantéia – Barthes’ text reflects the critical issues of authorship that are enacted through the dialogic interplay of materials in this box. The significance of Barthes writing “The Death of the Author” for this project is heightened when we consider that it appears alongside an audio recording of Duchamp reading “The Creative Act” (presented on one of several records found in the box). Given O’Doherty’s overall interest in Duchamp and his work, as well as the obvious parallels between Aspen, no. 5/6 and Duchamp’s Box-in-a-Valise (1935-41), it is more than likely that Barthes was (or became) aware of “The Creative Act” when he wrote “The Death of the Author.”

Questioning the Author-Artist

Following in the wake of Barthes’ text is the presentation of Foucault’s influential lecture “What Is an Author?” at the Collège de France in 1969, which he published as an essay the same year in Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie. Similar to “The Death of the Author,” Foucault’s essay confronts the overt privileging of the author’s authority over the text within modernity. But where Barthes focuses on articulating a death or disappearance of the author in order to refocus discussion on the significance of the reader – formulating a type of either/or – Foucault actively draws attention back to the (admittedly) problematized authorial position or function, examining what he terms the author-function:

It is obviously insufficient to repeat empty slogans: the author has disappeared; God and man died a common death.
Rather, we should re-examine the empty space left by the author’s disappearance; we should attentively observe, along its gaps and fault lines, its new demarcations, and the reapportionment of this void; we should await the fluid functions released by this disappearance. (25)

Here we see a subtle acknowledgement of Barthes’ text, which Foucault critiques by inferring that the “death of the author” is an empty slogan. While accepting the basic premise that the author (in the modernist sense) is no longer at the center of a given text or group of texts, this disappearance for Foucault is not the end of the author question but instead represents his point of departure for examining a simple yet vital problem: what is it that occupies the position once reserved for the author? No longer the end and test of art (to borrow Abrams’ description), the term “author” has become an open question in relation to the text that is understood at one and the same time as the author’s and not the author’s – a contradiction that Foucault makes clear from the outset he recognizes in his own writing, grounding his analysis in a subjective framework.

This problematic can be described quite simply as a splitting of the author into two distinct roles: the individual who is responsible for the actual creation of a specific text and the authorial identity that, typically associated with a name, is used to designate the role of the text’s creator. In the first case we are talking about an individual who makes (physically and/or conceptually) a text, the author as person – for example, the “Michel Foucault” who wrote “What Is an Author?” among other texts, who was born in 1926 and died in 1984. In the second case we are referring to the functioning persona associated with the text, the “figure who is outside and precedes” the text and yet the “text apparently points to” – the “Michel Foucault” whose name, no longer tied to the life of the individual, historically authenticates “What Is an Author?” (26). Foucault’s concept of the author-function
critically references this historical persona, what in Lacanian terms can be called the real author that gives authority and unity to a text on the level of history, a position that must be regarded as separate from the reality of the author who happens to have written the text. It is the often assumed correlation between these two roles, if not the outright and unquestioned belief in their similitude, that Foucault challenges through his examination of “the ‘author’ as a function of discourse,” a rational entity constructed around the (judicial) need for authority within modernity (27).

The division of the authorial position into personal and functional roles serves to highlight the inherent contradiction in the modern conception of the author-artist. If a person – and here we need to remember the consistent modernist claims (including Duchamp’s) that everyone can be or is an artist – were to actually embody and enact all of the qualities associated with the designation “author” or “artist,” this combination of (psychological) demands would foster what can only be described as a schizophrenic subjectivity. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari articulate a vision of this (irrational) entity in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*: “The schizophrenic is the universal producer. There is no need to distinguish here between producing and its product” (28). Interestingly enough, the framework of the book reflects this approach, which Foucault in his preface notes is informed “by seemingly abstract notions of multiplicities, flows, arrangements, and connections” that are best read and understood as an “art” (29). Such a play with language, in which contradictions are embraced rather than avoided or resolved, raises serious questions about the authority of the author-artist and by extension the authenticity or autonomy of the text as a source of (intrinsic) meaning.

In different but complimentary ways, Foucault and Duchamp each
enact this playfulness by approaching language – which we will consider for now in the restricted sense of written language – not as a transparent medium of expression but rather as an open discursive space that is, as Foucault poetically writes, “an attempt to exhaust language” (30). We see this particularly in the authors Foucault chooses to focus on, which prominently include Friedrich Hölderlin, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Raymond Roussel – Duchamp notably sharing an interest in Roussel – as well as in the development of his archaeological method of analysis that, stated simply, treats language as a stratified space into which we can dig. Duchamp’s use of language similarly serves not to clarify or describe but rather to carry the mind “towards other regions more verbal”; while specifically addressing the short texts he often inscribed on his readymades, this statement also speaks to his propensity for giving works complex or (to use Guillaume Apollinaire’s term) intellectual titles as well as his general interest in notes and puns (31). In both Foucault’s writing and Duchamp’s artistic practice, language – and here I propose we can extend its parameters to include not just written or spoken but also visual language – is an opportunity to make visible the contradictory functioning of the author-artist, a conflicted position that remains defined by its pathological need to exceed or even transcend itself (as seen throughout avant-garde practices).

For Duchamp, the schizophrenic quality of the modern author-artist is, as stated earlier, not just a theory but rather represents a philosophy of art developed directly out of his first-hand experience as a practicing artist. While the catalyst for Duchamp’s critique of the (privileged) role of the artist is likely the radically different responses to *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, it is the invention of the readymade that most powerfully manifests his critical perspective. To begin with, the term “readymade” should not be treated as a rigid artistic categorization that is seen as unifying all artworks under its banner but instead must, I
propose, be understood as describing a (particularly modern) theoretical or philosophical artistic discourse (32). This is precisely why, as Thierry de Duve tells us, Duchamp’s “readymades are easily annexed by the deconstructionists as a proof of irrelevance or obsolescence with regards to the notion of authorship” – and why the art historical treatment of the readymade as an artistic (rather than philosophical) gesture ironically serves to strengthen the authorial role of the artist, of Duchamp’s in particular (33). The challenge posed by *Fountain* (1917), for example, is not simply the fact that it questions the categorical space of “art” but rather that, by taking the authority of the author-artist – and the institutionalization of this authority – too seriously, it makes visible inherent contradictions in the modernist discourse of art. Through the artist’s act of choosing an already-made and undifferentiated object, the readymade functions as “art” because it is, in Foucaultian terms, strategically situated in the breach separating the two roles of the author-artist, within the space opened by art historical discourse – the object, in this case a urinal, being experienced at one and the same time as a *priori* and a *posteriori*. (Or, following Deleuze and Guattari, as a lack of distinction between *producing* and *its product*.) We can even go so far as to call the readymade a schizophrenic form of art that is consistently involved with its own conflicted and contradictory character, a condition inaugurated through an exaggerated split between the psychology of the artist as (absent) person and the artist as a functioning discursive presence (as *medium*).

Here the overlap between Foucault’s conception of the *author-function* and Duchamp’s arguments for the mediumistic qualities of the artist can be seen most notably in their shared critique of the assumed singular or immediate unity attributed to the position of the modernist author-artist. “The author,” according to Foucault,
constitutes a principle of unity in writing where any unevenness of production is ascribed to changes caused by evolution, maturation, or outside influence. In addition, the author serves to neutralize the contradictions that are found in a series of texts. Governing this function is the belief that there must be – at a particular level of an author’s thought, of his conscious or unconscious desire – a point where contradictions are resolved, where the incompatible elements can be shown to relate to one another or to cohere around a fundamental and originating contradiction. (34)

This forced unity, which results from a failure to distinguish between the author as person or individual and the author as author-function, is a means of establishing the vision of a complete and autonomous discourse that is at one and the same time supported by and serves to demonstrate a stable site of subjectivity within modern culture. By arguing that the author is a function of discourse – rather than the other way around – Foucault undermines the perceived unity and authority of the “author” (or “artist”), which, rather than referring to a real individual, becomes a space that “simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy” (35). Without its unifying principle, however, the author-artist becomes little more than a mediumistic being that, as Duchamp notes, is not conscious of what is being created or why – a task that is instead entrusted to the reader-spectator, whose role is to accept or judge the “social value” of an artist-author’s work (36). This is a key consequence of giving the attributes of a medium to the author-artist: recognizing that the person who creates a text cannot occupy the author-function and therefore should be treated as separate from their work.

**Duchampian Transference**

The question becomes: if the artist is not wholly responsible for the creation of art, but is dependent upon the spectator’s engagement with the work, what is the means by which these two
positions are able to fulfill the creative process? Duchamp similarly asks, if the artist “plays no role at all in the judgment of his own work, how can one describe the phenomenon which prompts the spectator to react critically to the work of art? In other words, how does this reaction come about?” His answer is quite significant: “This phenomenon is comparable to a transference from the artist to the spectator in the form of an esthetic osmosis taking place through the inert matter, such as pigment, piano or marble” (37). Of particular interest is his use of the term “transference” to describe the process of exchange between artist and spectator through the object of the artwork. This word choice can be read in two different but not mutually exclusive ways: first, the common usage in which one is referring to the act of transferring something and, second, the psychoanalytic understanding that describes the psychological process by which feelings, emotions, and even memories are unconsciously transferred or projected from one person onto another, typically an analyst in the clinical setting. (And, given his propensity for puns and other playful forms of using language, it is likely that both meanings are being employed simultaneously.) The aim of this final section is to consider the implications of Duchamp’s notion of transference within the process of the creative act, specifically as it relates to and extends the psychological and affective territories of psychoanalytic thought. Before considering this Duchampian transference – as I describe his particular approach – it is important that we first establish a basic understanding of transference as a concept.

“What are transferences?” Sigmund Freud writes in Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria, “They are new editions or facsimiles of the tendencies and phantasies which are aroused and made conscious during the process of the analysis; but they have this peculiarity, which is characteristic of their species, that they replace some earlier person by the person of the physician” (38). Published in 1905, this early formulation proposes transference as a form of resistance to
the analytic process on the part of the person being analyzed (the analysand), with the working through of the transference – by making oneself conscious of feelings or emotions rather than projecting them – representing a (potential) breakthrough in the analysis. An often-cited example is when patients transfer feelings of love onto their analyst, thereby stopping the analytic process until such time that this love can be recognized as belonging to a different object; this moment of conscious realization is for Freud a (if not the) cornerstone of psychoanalytic practice. Since its introduction, the concept of transference has continued to explore and extend as a tool of analysis and, more significantly for our purposes, as a more general operation that Melanie Klein suggests is evident “throughout life and influences all human relations” (39). It is through this expanded understanding of transference as a relational phenomenon applicable to everyday human relations that the concept, no longer restricted to the clinical setting, is able to be used as a vital concept for addressing the intersubjective exchanges that take place throughout modern life – with the relation of the author-artist and reader-spectator being a particular subset of this form of cultural analysis.

In the fourth chapter of Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp, Amelia Jones discusses Duchamp’s work through a psychoanalytic consideration of his (uncertain and chaotically eroticized) author-function, emphasizing the way his work plays out the relational qualities of transference through the creative exchange between artist and spectator via the artwork – which she treats as analogous to the clinical relationship of the analyst and analysand. Her (admittedly Lacanian) description of “transference” provides a valuable perspective on how we can approach Duchamp’s use of the term: “transference – this site where the struggle for meaning takes place via the spoken or written text that ‘represents’ the subject under analysis – is also the psychic site where both the analyst and analysand are constituted, in relation to each
other, as meaningful subjects” (40). This definition characterizes transference as an enunciative space, both representational and psychic, in which the subjective struggle for meaning is articulated through two interconnected relationships. The first is the relation of the reader-spectator to the text being examined, with the reader-spectator performing a role similar to that of an analyst and the text being the subject under analysis. The second is the relation of the reader-spectator to the author-artist, with the author-artist in this case playing the role of analyst to the reader-spectator that is now in the position of the analysand.

Jones clarifies the workings of these two relationships by discussing, in a notably psychoanalytic tone, how she (as a spectator) personally functions within these relational positions when viewing the work of Duchamp. As the interpreter of his artworks, Jones notes that she is “the analyst and Duchamp is the narrative I produce from his enunciative ‘symptoms’ as meaningful.” Yet, as she continues:

I am also his analysand, subject to his texts, and he is my ego ideal. I transfer my desires and unconscious wishes onto him as authority – identifying with him so as to produce myself as full. The fantasy “Duchamp” promises to take the place of the lack for me, even as I “master” him through analysis. I interpret his works, yet they are always already interpreted by his own selections, the “secondary revisions” of enunciative production…. I make the attempt to master him so I can submit myself to his mastery: We are, so to speak, in a reciprocal dialectic of analytic transference. (41)

In this manner Jones reads her encounter with his work as a dual act of relational subjection in which she at one and the same time is constituted by and constitutes Duchamp’s work, a process that she directly compares to analytic transference. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that Jones re-frames the parameters of the transference relationship using
Duchamp’s notion of the creative act. As she reveals through her analysis, the creative transference enacted in the artist-artwork-spectator relation is based within a series of interdependencies that are analogous to those found in the analyst-analysand relation of psychoanalytic transference; this correlation, far from drawing a mere parallel between discourses, actively demonstrates a fundamental discursive overlap on the inter-subjective or relational level.

This overlap may also account for Duchamp’s subtle but significant presence in the writings of Guattari, where the readymade serves (schizophrenically) as both exemplar and foil to his aesthetic theories. We see this particularly in his aesthetic paradigm, a re-envisioned form of analysis in which the psychology of modern subjectivity is examined through an aesthetic (rather than scientific) lens, a methodology that for Guattari, as Stephen Zepke observes, begins with the readymade – making “Duchamp the harbinger of a re-vitalized creative act” (42). Treated as both aesthetic and political, the readymade is seen as a language of creative enunciation that functions through an authorial and psychological refrain, privileging not the “origin” of a particular act, event or object but rather the complex subjective affects and emotions – what Guattari describes as a constellation of universes – that result from the relational interactions that the readymade facilitates. Here again we see evidence of the shared territory between clinical and cultural transferences, with art representing a key modern form of subjective creativity that Guattari actively incorporates into the realm of psychology on both theoretical – through his critical re-thinking of psychoanalysis – and practical – through his work as an analyst – means. For this reason his conception of transference is quite telling: no longer conceived as a dual relation between two subjects, Guattari views transference as (at minimum) a triangular relation that also includes a mediating object that functions as an ambiguous medium (43). Is not the readymade the ultimate (creative) expression of a
mediating object?

Jones also employs the readymade as a major instance of transference within Duchamp’s work, although for her it is the artist’s signature (in whatever form it takes) that is the ultimate site of the transferential relation. The urinal that Duchamp used in Fountain, for example, was part of a series of mass-produced objects that, at the time, could be found in commercial lavatory supply stores, meaning that it could be (and was) easily replaced by another of its kind with little to no difference in the overall experience of the work. The presence of a signature is therefore at odds with the inherent repeatability of a machine-made urinal, with the contradictory result of producing an individualized object that is multiple or manifold. By signing a urinal (one of many) with the pseudonym R. Mutt Duchamp makes the spectator’s relationship with the work a blatantly self-conscious and problematic one by destabilizing, on the one hand, the assumed unity of the work of “art” and, on the other hand, the perceived singularity of the artist’s act of creation – with the artist, in Foucault’s terms, functioning as simultaneously the internal function of the work’s creation that precedes the urinal and the external figure to which Fountain points. It is the ability of the readymade, as a literal new edition or facsimile of an already-existing object, to call attention to the arbitrariness of the author-artist’s discursive authority over the artwork that is its most challenging and dangerous quality. The instability of Duchamp’s authorial “I,” which the indexical signature of the “artist” stands in for, is in this way transferred via the art object to the spectator so that, as Jones states, his “shifting ‘I’ enforces an unstable intersubjective exchange, an ongoing process of transference” (44). Rather than a singular event, the creative act is here seen as the product of a recurrent and ongoing repetition – another key aspect of psychoanalytic transference (45) – with the readymade making obvious the continual transferential process, active but not recognized in all works of art, by
which an object is constituted and reconstituted as “art” by each consecutive spectator who (with the help of the artist’s *author-function*) recognizes it as such.

For Duchamp the artist’s role in the creation of an artwork is a means rather than an end, the last analysis being reserved for the evaluative and interpretive acts of the spectator and, more generally, the posterity (of art history). To understand Duchamp’s conception of transference therefore requires us to appreciate his vision of art as a psychological process of dialogue, one that does not stop when the artist has completed the artwork or even when it is placed within an institution of display, but continues on to include the reception and interpretation of the work on the social level. “Don’t say that the artist is a great thinker because he produces it,” Duchamp tells Calvin Tomkins. “The artist produces nothing until the onlooker has said, ‘You have produced something marvellous.’ The onlooker has the last word on it” (46). What we see in Duchamp’s proposed creative act is therefore not just a relation of artist and spectator or spectator and artwork, but rather involves a networking of the three. To return to Jones’ description of “transference,” it is the dialogue among the permutations of the two relationships she outlines – the manner in which the reader-spectator’s analysis of the text (and by extension the *author-function*) is also the site where the reader-spectator and author-artist connection is constituted or made (historically) *real* – that most closely articulate the dynamics of Duchampian transference as described in “The Creative Act.”

Within the text we find an invaluable clue to help us contextualize, both personally and historically, Duchamp’s approach to the artist-artwork-spectator relation. Following his introduction of the two poles and his proposed attribution of the ontological status of “medium” onto the position of the artist, he calls upon T. S. Eliot’s words from “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (written in 1919) to describe what he
sees as the split roles of the artist: “The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material” (47). Eric Cameron points to the fact that this is Duchamp’s only direct quotation of a critic, making it imperative that we take this reference seriously—particularly since, in spite of the perceived polarity between his vision of art and Eliot’s, Duchamp was obviously able to see in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” something of the conflicted character of the modern position of the “artist” that spoke to him, positively or negatively, about the (most often) unacknowledged realities of creating works of art (48). In addition to the above quoted characterization of the artist, we also find in Eliot’s essay two key ideas that parallel aspects of the creative act as Duchamp describes the process.

The first concerns the depersonalization of the artist, a process of “continual self-sacrifice” or “extinction of personality” that Eliot suggests is a necessary progression by which the mind of a mature artist becomes “a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations” (49). His use of the word “medium” is especially significant given the importance of the term in Duchamp’s text. For Eliot, the expression of a (great) artist is based not on personality but rather the ability to escape one’s self, to function as a medium— with much of the term’s religious connotations— through which (great) works of art are created. We can see in this depersonalized vision many of the qualities that characterize Duchamp’s notion of the artist as a mediumistic being, with one overriding distinction. Whereas Eliot clearly believes in the artist’s privileged position, which the role of medium as a genius-like state beyond the individual serves to maintain, Duchamp’s proposal of giving the artist the attributes of a medium directly undermines the artist’s
authority over the work precisely because of the disconnect between the person (who suffers) and the mind (that creates). In other words, while Eliot uses the term “medium” to describe a condition of higher (objective) authority that the author-artist achieves through the sacrifice of the personal – which, as he suggests, turns art towards a condition of science – for Duchamp the role of “medium” defines – through a (playfully) pseudo-scientific description – the unawareness or, as he worded it in the 1949 roundtable, irresponsibility of the author-artist in terms what is created and why. “The artist doesn’t count. He does not count. Society takes what it wants,” Duchamp tells Tomkins in no uncertain terms (50).

The second idea in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that is of interest to us is Eliot’s suggestive scientific analogy in which he describes the functioning of the author-artist as catalyst, specifically comparing the process of creating art to a chemical reaction. We are invited to consider the action that takes place when oxygen and sulphur dioxide “are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nonetheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged” (51). The filament of platinum, necessarily active without either being depleted or leaving a trace of itself in the final product, represents for Eliot the ideal mind of the author-artist in the creative act. As he makes clear in the lines following this analogy – those quoted by Duchamp – the ideal or perfect author-artist results from the separation of the affects of personality from the (de-personalized) expression of the mind that, like the platinum, creates without leaving a trace of its self. We can easily apply the basic parameters of Eliot’s use of this analogy to Duchamp’s arguments for a creative act that is no longer defined by the authorizing presence of the artist (as the end and test of art), although, unlike Eliot, Duchamp would never claim that the work possesses no trace of the
artist. For Duchamp, the artist’s personal intentions and desires (the “series of efforts, pains, satisfactions, refusals, decisions”) are irrelevant to the artwork’s final realization, which, like the created sulphurous acid, must be understood and judged as distinct from the artist (as person) that created it. The reason for this is because “the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions” that, especially in terms of aesthetic choices, cannot be considered fully self-conscious and therefore must not be treated as the singular source of and for the work’s meaning (52). In this manner, while the artist (as author-function) is the catalyst for the artwork, the actual realization of a work of art can be accomplished only through the transferential process of the creative act.

This last point brings up an important distinction that should be made between Eliot’s use of this analogy and our present consideration of it in relation to Duchamp’s text. By focusing exclusively on the filament of platinum and what its function has to say about the mind of the author-artist Eliot overlooks the remaining elements involved in this chemical reaction, thereby leaving out most of the relational interactions beyond the central figure of the author-artist. In this respect, Duchamp can be seen as taking this analogy more seriously than Eliot by considering not just the catalyst, which is only the first pole in Duchamp’s equation, but also the two gasses — the oxygen and sulphur dioxide roughly coinciding with the spectator and the artwork in its raw state — that combine to form a new acid — sulphurous acid again roughly standing in for the final realization, accomplished by the second pole of the spectator, of a work as “art.” The complex relational process that we see in the formation of this new acid can in this way be used to help describe or illustrate, in quasi-scientific terms, the transmutation that takes place when inert matter becomes a work of art — a process that is for Duchamp determined through an (aesthetic) act of transference.
Let us now examine the functioning of Duchampian transference through an (imagined) encounter with the readymade, in this case *Bicycle Wheel* (1913). To begin with, we know from Duchamp’s numerous accounts that this object began not out of an active intention to make an “artwork” but rather for the personal curiosity and pleasure of attaching the wheel from a bicycle to the top of a wooden stool, in order to have something to play with in his studio. The truthfulness of his claims – in a manner that strangely reflects Freudian psychoanalysis – are irrelevant, since what is important is not his real actions or intentions but rather his framing and interpreting of himself through what he chooses (consciously or unconsciously) to say or not say. In fact, his conception of the personal *art coefficient* is based within this type of discrepancy, noting the psychological and affective differences between what an artist intends to create (the unexpressed but intended) and what is actually created (the unintentionally expressed). Thierry de Duve’s describes the art coefficient as “Duchamp’s Freudian (even Lacanian) witty and ironic redefinition of the romantic self,” which presents as a “measurable ratio between repressed or failed intentions, idiosyncrasies and preferences on the one hand, and the return of the repressed, Freudian slips and failed acts on the other – in other words, the ratio between (disgusted) ‘taste’ and (ridiculous) ‘genius’” (53). Therefore, it is not Duchamp’s intentions when creating *Bicycle Wheel* that are of interest to us but rather his conceptual and material act(s) of creating this (aesthetic) object that, regardless of whether it is “good” or “bad,” exists as *art in a raw state*. The following illustration – which I have loosely based on the visual language of *Coffee Mill* (1911) – describes the basic subjective mechanism of Duchamp’s relation to the readymade.
What exists at the completion of this first pole, which is the end of the artist’s personal contribution to the creative act, is the work of art in a raw state that Duchamp proposes is the “inert matter” through which the (creative) transference occurs. The second pole of the creative process begins when the spectator encounters this raw artwork – in our current example, when we stand in front of the artistic construct that is *Bicycle Wheel*. It is the role of the spectator to (aesthetically) refine the work by, on the one hand, reacting critically to what the artist presents – experienced as what Duchamp calls an aesthetic osmosis from artist to spectator through the artwork – and, on the other hand, (actively) judging the work as perceived and interpreted from the position of the spectator that is notably disconnected from the work’s creator. Here we can recognize the shift in the role of the artist’s relation to their work. While Duchamp initially created *Bicycle Wheel*, once this work entered the outside world its connection to the person “Marcel Duchamp” is replaced by an association with the “Marcel Duchamp” that exists strictly as a function of art historical discourse – a contradictory existence as that is at once a presence and
absence, which I have illustrated by (following Derrida) putting the term “artist” under erasure.

It is the author-function of Duchamp (and not the real person) that we in fact engage with when viewing Bicycle Wheel, a reality of the artist’s position – as a mediumistic being that is denied a state of consciousness on the aesthetic plane – that consequently leads to the realization that the artist-artwork-spectator relation is not unidirectional (emanating from artist). Rather, the functioning of the transference as Duchamp describes it necessarily involves two interdependent and dialogic creative actions. In the first we see a linear transfer from the artist through the artwork to the spectator and on to posterity, whereas in the second the critical (and answerable) response of the spectator is transferred onto the work of art, which in turn impacts the cultural understanding of the artist’s author-function and therefore the posterity of both the artist and the work (54).
This dynamic vision of the act of artistic creation therefore hinges on an artwork’s capacity to affect the spectator, who emerges – or, in Barthes term, is born – through an active participation in the transference process. Since it is the spectator who is tasked with completing the work that the artist begins, with actually making the historical work of art, we must acknowledge the (subjective) authority of the spectator’s look as a catalyst for these relational interactions. As Duchamp tells Tomkins: “The onlooker is part of the making of the painting but also exerts a diabolical influence by looking alone,” which he stresses is a “transcendental” action through which spectator’s “change the physical image without knowing it” (55). Here we can recognize the full extent of Duchamp’s theory, which aims not only to fundamentally question the assumed authority of the author-artist but also to establish a vision of art that has no definitive beginning or end. The creative act exists in and through the dialogic relations of Duchampian transference, as the spectator gets caught up in the repeated and repeatable relations that the artwork engenders.
References


2. In her Masters thesis on “The Creative Act,” Lauri Nelson reproduces several key documents related to Duchamp’s text including the schedule for the A.F.A. convention (appendix 6), the January 1957 draft of “The Creative Act” (appendix 5), and the “Biographical Sheet” that Duchamp filled out for the convention, in which he refers to himself as a “freelance artist” (appendix 3). See Lauri G. Nelson, “This Kind of Circus, all in Cordiality”: *Marcel Duchamp’s Speech “The Creative Act,”* M.A. Thesis (Houston: Rice University, 1994), 1104-120. This document is available online at: http://scholarship.rice.edu/bitstream/handle/1911/
This roundtable was organized as a means of confronting the question of the state of art in the mid-twentieth century, bringing together a number of prominent individuals in fields related to art. In addition to Duchamp, the participants were George Boas, Gregory Bateson (who would also be on the panel with Duchamp at the American Federation of the Arts Convention in 1957), Kenneth Burke, Alfred Frankenstein, Robert Goldwater, Darius Milhaud, Andrew C. Richie, Arnold Schoenburg (who could not attend but instead provided a statement), and Frank Lloyd Wright. The roundtable consisted of three official sessions, with an unofficial session added at the end.

1. Marcel Duchamp, et al., *The Western Round Table on Modern Art [Transcript of Proceedings]*, ed. Douglas MacAgy (San Francisco: San Francisco Art Association, 1949), 44c. This transcript is available online on UbuWeb at: http://www.ubu.com/historical/wrtma/transcript.htm. It should be noted that Duchamp starts off the roundtable discussion with a statement markedly similar this the one I have quoted, although his wording is a bit less concise. In this first version he connects the esthetic echo to the lack of an adequate definition of art, stating: “We also imply that art cannot be understood through the intellect, but is felt through an emotion presenting some analogy with a religious faith or a sexual attraction – an esthetic echo.” Duchamp,


1. This discrepancy between the reception of his work in America and France is, Miriam Jordan and I argue, a key motivating factor in Duchamp’s decision to establish the major collection of his artwork at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. See Miriam Jordan and Julian Jason Haladyn, “The Posthumous Exile of Marcel Duchamp” [Errata Series pamphlet] (London: Blue Medium Press, 2013).

1. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 31; 45.


1. In a particularly compelling exchange at the 1949 roundtable, Gregory Bateson and Frank Lloyd Wright respond to Duchamp’s statement that the artwork is independent of the artist: *Bateson*: Now, Mr.
Duchamp, what you are saying is that the artist is the picture’s way of getting itself painted. That is a very serious and reasonable thing to say, but that implies that in some sense, the work of art exists before it is there on canvas. Duchamp: Yes; it has to be pulled out. Bateson: Which is on its way out. Wright: All right, gentlemen you can put it at that end too, if you want to, but no work of art is ever going to rise higher than the artist. Duchamp: Who is great, the work or the man? Duchamp, et al., The Western Round Table on Modern Art, 31a.


1. This quotation is taken from the contents page of *Aspen*, no. 5/6, where O’Doherty presents a lengthy quote from his pseudonym Sigmund Bode’s 1928 (fictitious) book *Placement as Language*. Andrew Stafford has adapted *Aspen*, no. 5/6 for the web, presenting the box as a series of twenty-eight numbered items that include, in addition to the box itself, printed material, records, a reel of super-8 film and several (small) artworks. See: [http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/index.html](http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/index.html)


1. Michel Foucault, “The Father’s ‘No’,” *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, 86.

1. Marcel Duchamp, “Apropos of ‘Readymades,’” *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 141. This text is of a talk he gave in 1961 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

1. Such an approach, while not explicitly argued for, is at least intimated by Octavio Paz in his essay “The Castle of Purity.” When discussing the readymade, he notes that the “wealth of commentaries on their significance … shows that their interest is not plastic but critical or philosophical,” with Paz later in the text referring to Duchamp’s gesture as “a philosophical … game more than an artistic operation.” Octavio Paz, *Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare*, trans. Rachel Phillips and Donald Gardner (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990), 22; 28.


1. Foucault, “What Is an Author?” 128. Foucault explores this issue in *The Archaeology of*


1. Stephen Zepke, “The Readymade: Art as the Refrain of Life,” in *Deleuze, Guattari and the Production of the New* ed. Simon O’Sullivan and Stephen Zepke (New York: Continuum, 2008), 33. While Zepke’s treatment of the readymade is admirable, his dialectic distinction between a Duchampian “conceptual” version and a Guattarian “affectual” version, particularly in relation to his claim that the readymade is re-made by Guattari (and Deleuze) “against Duchamp,” does not hold up – and, I would add, is not supported by Guattari’s treatment of Duchamp – since the readymade as Duchamp conceived it is already a ground for a modern form of art based within an (affective) act of becoming for the spectator. Zepke, “The Readymade,” 35.


2. Jacques Lacan’s discussion of transference is particularly helpful here, since it can also be
applied to a reading of the readymade. As he states: “If transference is only repetition, it will always be repetition of the same missed experience.” Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 143. Considered in relation to Lacan’s statement, the readymade can be seen as repeated and repeatable moments of transference that, as Duchamp makes clear, are constituted within and through the relational gap between artist and spectator. “What art is in reality is this missing link, not the links which exist,” Duchamp tells Arturo Schwarz, noting that art is no what we see: “art is the gap.” Quoted in Dalia Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 135.


1. Eric Cameron, “Given,” in The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp, ed. Thierry de Duve (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 1. In the discussion that follows this text (see pages 31-39) Rosalind Krauss takes particular issue with the connection being made between Duchamp and Eliot, which not only betrays her understanding of Duchamp but also cannot be supported by anything in his practice. Marjorie Perloff explores this topic in her essay “Duchamp’s Eliot: The Detours of Tradition and the Persistence of Individual Talent” – originally published in T. S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition, ed. Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) – available online at: http://marjorieperloff.com/stein-duchamp-picasso/duchamps-eliot/


1. Tomkins, Marcel Duchamp: Afternoon Interviews, 30.


In psychoanalytic terms, this back-and-forth relation of artist and spectator involves not just transference but also a countertransference, which in the clinical setting describes the analyst’s act of projecting (unconscious) feelings or emotions onto – and most often in response to – the analysand. I have intentionally avoided bringing up this second term because, following the logic of Guattari’s view of transference, I believe the act of counter-transference is already contained within the transference dynamic. Particularly for our present discussion, although I do believe this holds true generally, distinguishing between these two forms of transferential relations denies the necessarily dialogic nature of the psychological interactions being described.

1. Tomkins, Marcel Duchamp: Afternoon Interviews, 60-61. Duchamp uses Nude Descending a Staircase as an example of what he means, noting that it went from a scandalous painting to a boring one “by being looked at too much.”

Five Small Things about L.H.O.O.Q.
Attempting to recall exactly when in 1919 the *L.H.O.O.Q.* had been made, Marcel Duchamp himself offered two different dates: in conversations with Sidney, Harriet and Carroll Janis in early 1953, he mentioned December;\(^{(1)}\) in conversations with Pierre Cabanne in June 1966, October.\(^{(2)}\) Either date—October 1919 or December 1919—may be the right one.

From early August to December 27, 1919, Duchamp resided at avenue Charles-Floquet (Paris 7e), in the home of Francis Picabia and Gabrielle Buffet (the latter pregnant with Picabia’s fourth child, who was born on September 15). Picabia had been living for some time (days or weeks) in rue Émile-Augier (Paris 16e) with Germaine Everling, his mistress, who was also pregnant by him (their child was born January 5, 1920).\(^{(3)}\) This particular situation (two places of residence, two pregnant women, etc.) would indicate that during this nearly five-month stay there were few, and perhaps no contacts between Duchamp and Picabia (except, in all likelihood, towards the end of the stay), and may explain why *L.H.O.O.Q.*
was not published in issues 9 (November 1919), 10 (December 1919), or 11 (February 1920) of 391, Picabia’s journal, but rather as a Picabia version entitled Tableau dada par Marcel Duchamp in issue 12 (March 1920).\(^{(4)}\) Michel Sanouillet argues that “Picabia wrote to ask him [Duchamp] for authorization to ‘redo’ a Mona Lisa for 391, and the authorization was naturally granted. But Picabia, who had only a vague memory of Duchamp’s work, contented himself with drawing the moustache.”\(^{(5)}\) In fact, Picabia simply redid “L.H.O.O.Q.,” the inscription that would become the title of the readymade.\(^{(6)}\) He also wrote these initials vertically and without periods on one of his own canvases, Le double monde, dated [December] 1919, which was exhibited on stage by André Breton during the First Friday of (the journal) Littérature, January 23, 1920, the first Dada manifestation in Paris.\(^{(7)}\)

2

Owing to its title (Tableau dada par Marcel Duchamp), for many years the Picabia version passed for the original. Along with an enlarged replica (done in late January or early February 1930),\(^{(8)}\) the original was not displayed until March 1930 in Paris in an exhibition titled La peinture au défi and with an important preface by Louis Aragon. For a poet, novelist and critic like Aragon, a readymade was not, from that time on, merely an industrial object removed from its context and divorced from its utilitarian function.

3

It must be pointed out that the colour reproduction which is the basis of the work was not a postcard, despite what so many people have stated verbally or in writing.\(^{(9)}\) A glance at the
back of the reproduction, published by Arturo Schwarz in 1969 in the 1st edition of his catalogue, shows that it is not arranged in the usual way, with one space for the address and stamp (at right), and another for the “message” and the caption of the illustration (at left). The reproduction has been inscribed by Duchamp with a technical indication (in pencil) on how to photograph the picture on the front and, later, above this indication, with an official declaration in the presence of a notary (in ink) stating that it is indeed the original.\(^\text{(10)}\) The only trait shared by the small palimpsest—writing on writing—on the back and the picture on the front is the lead [in French: mine] pencil markings (additions of the moustache and goatee)\(^\text{(11)}\) on the Mona Lisa’s face [in French: mine].

But where did Duchamp obtain this colour reproduction? The most likely explanation, as he mentioned to the Janises in 1953, is that he purchased it in a boutique near the Louvre, in the rue de Rivoli, which sold inexpensive copies of reproductions of the museum’s masterpieces, a popular practice in all large cities with major museums. It should also be recalled that in April 1911 Leonardo’s highly celebrated work, painted in the early sixteenth century, had been stolen from the Louvre (and not recovered until December 1913). Since it was believed to have disappeared or been destroyed, massive quantities of colour reproductions were distributed during these years or immediately afterwards, including photographs both intact or touched up, some in postcard format.\(^\text{(12)}\) As well, there was undoubtedly an awareness that 1919 was the 400th anniversary of the painter’s death. These two events (the perhaps irremediable loss and the anniversary) come into play in Duchamp’s choice.

When Duchamp sent a letter (New York, May 9, 1949) to his friend Henri-Pierre Roché asking him to purchase a vial of serum—become the vial of Air de Paris—to replace the one, currently broken, he had brought back from Paris in late December 1919 for his friends Louise and Walter Arensberg, he
wrote:

Could you go into the pharmacy on the corner of rue Blomet and the rue de Vaugirard (if it’s still there, that’s where I bought the first ampoule) and buy an ampoule like this one: 125 c.c. and of the same measurements as the drawing [...]

—If not rue Blomet, somewhere else—but, as far as possible, the same shape and size, thanks.\(^{13}\)

A glance at a map of Paris shows that there is no corner of Blomet-Vaugirard, since these streets (15e) run parallel to each other! I use this example to demonstrate that a specific indication, even on the part of the author, may quite simply be inaccurate, even erroneous. And so it was for \(L.H.O.O.Q.\), postcard.

And when Duchamp, in “Apropos of Myself” (1962-1964), describes this colour reproduction as “a cheap chromo,” it must be pointed out that in French as in English, \(chromo\) is the abbreviation of \(chromolithographie\), “image lithographique en couleur” (Petit Robert I), and \(chromolithograph\) “a color print produced by chromolithography” (The American Heritage of the English Language). In French, however, \(chromo\), now a masculine (and no longer feminine) form, has a pejorative sense: “\(toute image en couleur de mauvais goût\)” [any colour print in bad taste]. This added meaning, which highlights the notion of taste, introduces an aesthetic, even artistic, note; such is not the case in English, where \(cheap\), in this example, signifies “of poor quality,” but particularly “inexpensive.”\(^{14}\)

4

When, during his 1966 conversations with Cabanne, Duchamp spoke of Picabia and \(L.H.O.O.Q.\), he used the opportunity, if I may say so, to add:

Another time, Picabia did a cover for 391 with the portrait of
Georges Carpentier, the boxer; he and I were as much alike as two drops of water, which is why it was amusing. It was a composite portrait of Georges Carpentier and me.\(^{15}\)

During the summer of 1923, Georges Carpentier went to Picabia’s home in Tremblay-sur-Mauldre, the little village where the artist had been living since 1922. Picabia did a profile of the boxer, who even signed the portrait. When Picabia, over a year later, decided to put this portrait on the first page of the last issue of 391 (issue 19, October 1924), he crossed out Carpentier’s signature incompletely (it can still be seen under the cross-out markings) and added “Rrose Sélavy / by Picabia”\(^{16}\).

Accordingly, if, by contiguity, this “composite portrait” likewise designates \textit{L.H.O.O.Q.}, Duchamp’s 1961 statement makes sense:

The curious thing about that moustache and goatee is that when you look at it the \textit{Mona Lisa} becomes a man. It is not a woman disguised as a man; it is a real man, and that was my discovery, without realizing it at the time.

In 1919, a woman (\textit{Mona Lisa} in \textit{L.H.O.O.Q.}) is also a man, just as in 1920-1921, a man (Marcel Duchamp as Rose, then Rrose, Sélavy) is also a woman.

5

Without actually entering into an interpretation of the famous readymade, one notes, nonetheless, that the 400th anniversary of Leonardo’s death may have been not only a trigger (as an anniversary), but also a constraint (as a set of numbers), with the 4 indicating that only four letters could be used, and the 00 suggesting that one of them—which must be an O—be reduplicated.\(^{18}\) As can be seen afterwards as well, these four letters (as Duchamp states in “Apropos of Myself”) are in
alphabetical order—H, L, O, Q—in the name of the street (cHarLes-flOQuet) where he lived at the time. But they are also in the name of the process at the basis of this reproduction, which is cHromoLithOgraphiQue. And I note that in New York the name of the notary chosen by Duchamp, whose signature on December 22, 1944 certified that the work was the original ("This is to certify that this is the original ‘ready made’ L H O O Q Paris 1919"),\(^{(19)}\) was Elsie Jenriche.\(^{(20)}\) How can we fail to see that she was there because of her name as well (which, by this fact, is a metatextual reference to one of the issues in the work), a mix of \textit{I} in English or \textit{Ich} in German and of \textit{else}, and that the issue of "gender" (\textit{jenre}, another way of spelling \textit{genre}) comes into play, since \textit{else} rhymes with the feminine (elle: La Joconde, La Gioconda), which in turn rhymes with the masculine (\textit{L}: Leonardo, Louvre), she having become a he!

Finally, if we trace a vertical line at a right angle to the top of the work and passes it through the centre of the moustache, it becomes clear that, owing to the angle of the face, the line runs alongside the nose, at left, of the female—and now also male—figure and arrives “down below” (as Duchamp would say in 1961), exactly between “L.H.” and “O.O.Q.” This reduplication of the O is indicated once again.

Notes

Footnote Return

1. Still unedited, the conversations with the Janis family (Sidney, the father, Harriet, the mother, and Carroll, the son) occurred on the occasion of Duchamp’s preparation of the catalogue and hanging of the exhibition \textit{Dada 1916-1923} at the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, April 15 – May 9, 1953. In the integrated chronology of the catalogue


Footnote Return 3. It was a day after the meeting of André Breton, who had been invited there, and twelve days before Tristan Tzara arrived there to live on January 17, his stay coinciding with the start of what Michel Sanouillet called “Dada à Paris”; see his general survey, Dada à Paris (Paris: Pauvert, 1965). The seat of the “MoUvEmEnT DADA, Berlin, Genève, Madrid, New York, Zurich,” according to the letter paper with this heading, was now in Paris. Furthermore, I notice the following coincidence (which was perhaps not a coincidence in 1919, considering the state of knowledge on Leonardo’s work): when Duchamp was in Paris that year, Picabia’s two women (his wife and mistress) were pregnant with sons; when, in the spring of 1503, Francesco del Giocondo commissioned Leonardo to paint a portrait of his wife, she had already given him two sons (in May 1496 and December 1502). See Daniel Arasse, Léonard de Vinci. Le rythme du monde (1997; Paris: Hazan, 2003), 388-89. The rhyme, here, is in between Mona Lisa [Joconde] and fertile [féconde].

Footnote Return 4. To Cabanne, Duchamp says Tableau dada de [sic] Marcel Duchamp.


7. The two O’s in “L H O O Q,” themselves in the centre of two other O’s shaped like strings forming 8’s, or propeller blades, but without an axis, soft and bent by the wind, are equally–and doubly–the O’s of “dOuble” and “wOrld” [*mOnde*]. The small gap at the top left in one of these other O’s is matched only by the small gap in the À of “À DOMICILE” [at home], another inscription, and by the small addition–the tail–of the Q in “L H O O Q.” One way of creating an ironic coincidence between mathematical speculations (topOLOGY) and commercial speculations (delivery “à domicile“, that is, at home [*AU LOGIS*]).
8. “I made, just before leaving Paris, a Mona Lisa, for Aragon [...] / Man Ray has the 1st Mona Lisa”, letter from Duchamp to Jean Crotti, Villefranche-sur-mer, February 6, 1930, in Affectionately, Marcel : The Selected Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp, edition by Francis Naumann and Hector Obalk, translation by Jill Taylor (Ghent and Amsterdam : Ludion Press, 2000), 171.


10. I note that Duchamp never used a postcard in subsequent replicas.

11. In the original French version of this article I use the plural, as did Duchamp in April 1942, when he indicated in ink at the bottom of the model of one of Picabia’s two versions (that reproduced in 391): Moustaches par Picabia / barbiche par Marcel Duchamp.” In French, the singular and plural are used indifferently for certain words, for example: ciseau and ciseaux (two blades), pantalon and pantalons (two legs), moustache and moustaches (two cheeks or, simply, two sides of the face). Furthermore, I note that the indication, inscribed by Picabia on two lines pencilled vertically to the right of the reproduction, begins with two liaisons—the one starting the 1 of “1 cliché” on the first line, and the other starting the s of “sans” on the second line—which are matched only by the tips of the moustache! For a reproduction with commentary, see Francis Naumann, The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, catalogue of the exhibition at Achim Moeller Fine Art, New York, October
If, in fact, Arp came into possession of these two versions during his trip to Paris in April 1942, his meeting with Duchamp (they had known each other since 1926) could only have taken place in the non-occupied zone of southern France (in Grasse where Arp lived or in Sanary where Duchamp was living before his departure for the United States on May 14th).


16. See Michel Sanouillet, *Francis Picabia et “391,”* 166. One can see (391, 127) Carpentier’s signature and Picabia’s addition under some of the typewritten lines printed at the bottom of the page.


18. These two O’s also evoke, by means of the
rhyme “0.” / water [eau], the mountain lake and the plains lake in the *Mona Lisa*, respectively at the top right and a little farther down left of the landscape dominated by the loggia where Lisa, the model, is. And what about the winding road that leaves the plains lake, and which is echoed in the tail of the “Q” (calligraphied by Duchamp)?

19. A presentative sentence in another, the referent of “This” (This, as in “This is my Body” or in “This is a work of art”) being cataphoric (that is, it follows the pronoun): in the first case, it is “the original ‘ready made’;” in the second, it is the entire proposition that shapes the first case.


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**Why Teeny’s Hair?**

I don’t remember quite when I stumbled upon the chord sequence that constitutes the structure of this song, but it was long before I found an appropriate theme to write the lyrics around.

There is an O. Henry “Gift of the Magi” quality to Teeny Duchamp’s donation of her beautiful tresses to the construction of her husband’s creation. I think this sentimental association works well with the melody to the
benefit of a song I am very happy to have written.

Swirling around in the lyrics are references to Apollinaire, Gertrude Stein, and fuck it, I’ll just go through the whole god damned thing verse by verse. This really is a rare opportunity to do this sort of thing. No kidding, really…

It begins…

Teeny’s hair
Falls down gently to her shoulders
She doesn’t look any older
Than she did when she was young”

Figure 1
Marcel Duchamp,
Given: 1. The
Waterfall, 2. The
Illuminating Gas, 1946-66

Okay, here’s the scoop: “Teeny” is “Teeny” but “she” is not “Teeny”. “She” is the mannequin in Philly. Etant Donnes. (Fig. 1)
Filled with the stolen Mona Lisas
Di Milo’s broken pieces
That’s where the pictures are hung”

M.D.’s early champion, Guillaume Apollinaire, was a suspect in the disappearance of the *Mona Lisa* before the war. The best way I can describe this “room” is to say that it is the imagination. A space seen by the mind’s eye. “The pictures” are, of course, the works that are not only imagined, but brought to realization.

“When he arrives
All of the men with badges trust him
Take a Spanish door through customs
It’s no crime, it is no crime”

This is my idea of what it could have been like traveling to New York from Cadaques with the “Spanish door” M.D. acquired for the outside of *Etant Donnes*.

“Ascending the stairs
Where you accept the Legion of Honor
And the mark of Cain is upon her
For all time, yes for all time”

Obviously Marcel did not ever receive the award mentioned, but, he did become famous—“mark of Cain”—and pigeonholed as a Cubist because of the scandal in New York over his “*Nude Descending a Staircase*”. And to make things rhyme, which by doing so pisses off all of the racist Bob Mould fans who criticize me for paying attention to the way words sound, and not coming off like a self-hating, sexist Ezra Pound wannabe, I have referred to M.D. as “her”. I know he was a he. Most of
“Take my knights away
Sweep all my horses off of the table
Show me strategies if you’re able
Show me how the game can be played”

This verse is about chess. It sounds kinda sexy though, doesn’t it? The line “Show me strategies if you’re able” could be about artistic strategies also; if you replace the word “horses” with “expectations” it means much.

“We go to the place
Where all the re-named roses gather
And the bearded ladies lather
To be shaved, oh to be shaved…”

A Rose by any other other name would smell as sweet. And of course, Rose is a Rose is a Rose is a Rose…What if rose is eros? Rrose? (Fig. 2) Marcel “re-named” himself Rrose. “Bearded ladies” are in reference to “L.H.O.O.Q.” and “L.H.O.O.Q.RASEE (SHAVED)”. (Fig. 3) Also what else in the story is shaved? Hairless? I’ll let you folks come up with that answer. If you ever run into me somewhere, say the answer to me and I’ll buy you a Seven-Up.

Thank you.
Figure 2
Man Ray, Rrose Sélavy, 1921

Figure 3
Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q. Shaved*, 1965

"Grant Hart, "Teeny’s Hair,” in *GOOD NEWS FOR MODERN MAN*" (1999)

Figs. 1-3
©2003 Succession Marcel Duchamp, ARS, N.Y./ADAGP, Paris. All rights reserved.
An exit
Marcel Duchamp and Jules Laforgue

Pieter de Nijs
ntroduction
In 1887, the then famous actor Coquelin Cadet published an illustrated book called Le Rire. The illustrations were made by Eugène Bataille. One of these, showing Leonardo’s Mona Lisa smoking a pipe, can be regarded as a direct predecessor of Marcel Duchamp’s L.H.O.O.Q (1919).

Bataille, better known as Sapeck, was an important member of the Incohérents, a group of artists who from 1882 on organized several exhibitions as alternatives for the official Salon. Parodies of famous pieces of art, political and social satire, and graphical puns were at the root of these exhibitions. Like their literary counterparts, who adorned themselves with such fantastic names as Hydropathes, Hirsutes, Zutistes, and Jemenfoutistes, the activities of the Incohérents were mainly aimed at ridiculing the official art world. The painters, writers, journalists, and cartoonists who participated in the activities of these artistic groups generally convened in the cabarets artistiques that sprang up in Paris in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, first on the rive gauche, in the Quartier Latin, later in Montmartre. Most of them published their work in the illustrated newspapers and magazines that appeared after the abolition of press censorship in 1881 and the emergence of new and faster (photomechanical) printing. These newspapers offered many writers and artists new opportunities to provide for their livelihood and to bring their work to the attention of a wider audience.

The activities of groups like the Hydropathes and the Incohérents have long been seen solely as a means to “shock the bourgeois” (épater le bourgeois), as joking-for-joking’s-sake. The attitude pervading much of their work was being described as fumisme: a mocking of official values and societal norms through biting satire, puerile humor, and practical joking. In recent years though, this view has made way for a more serious approach, in which their work is being linked to that of the avant-garde movements of the 1920s and
Apart from that, it is easy to overlook the links that existed between the groups of artists and writers that gathered in the so-called *cabarets artistiques* of Montmartre, and the artists and writers who are nowadays considered as the founders of modern art and literature. Cabarets such as the Chat Noir attracted Hydropathes-poets and -novelists such as Charles Cros, Alphonse Allais, and Jules Lévy, along-side with singers like Jules Jouy and Maurice Mac-Nab and actors like Coquelin Cadet. But more established poets such as Jean Moréas, Léon Bloy, and Paul Verlaine were also regular visitors, and the same goes for Gustave Kahn and Jules Laforgue. Moréas is considered to be the “founder” of symbolism. Novelist Léon Bloy, an ardent catholic (though he detested the catholic church and its institutions), was one of the sharpest polemics of his time, mixing his high-pitched sentences with sneers and curses. Verlaine, of course, was the exemplary *poète maudit*. Kahn allegedly was the inventor of “free verse,” in which the tight rules, rhythm, and end rhyme of romantic poetry was abandoned to give way to assonance and internal rhyme. And Jules Laforgue made his first literary friends amongst the Hydropathes around 1880. He too has a claim to the invention of “free verse.”

The poems, songs, and *monologues* that were performed or recited in the cabarets combined social criticism with irony and self-mockery; the language used was a mix of popular or vulgar words and sentences, full of *argot* and newly formed words, paired-off with unconventional rhyme and poetical structures. In the poems of – nowadays generally acknowledged – writers such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, Gustave Kahn, and Jules Laforgue (to name a few) – experimental innovations can be found that are similar to the *nouvéautés* in the poems and songs that were performed in the cabarets. (2) The ideas of these poetic innovators mixed more or less perfectly with
those of the poets and singer-performers of the Montmartre cabarets.

In this article, I want to point to a link that can be established between the work of the artists who lived and worked in Montmartre at the end of the nineteenth century and that of Marcel Duchamp. The work of Jules Laforgue can be seen as a part of that link. I will try, on the one hand, to show what Jules Laforgue owed to the Hydropathes and other “proto-Dada” groups in his attempts to renew poetry and, on the other hand, to discuss the way he influenced Duchamp, who around 1911-1912 was looking for a way out of the artistic deadlock he felt he was trapped in. I will also try to show that Duchamp translated parts of what Laforgue did on a poetic level to the visual arts.

Duchamp has stressed the importance of several writers for the development of his ideas. He never concealed his admiration for Raymond Roussel and Jean-Pierre Brisset. He loved the humorous stories of Alphonse Allais and looked upon Alfred Jarry as a sympathetic soul. And he also positively referred to Jules Laforgue: “I liked Laforgue a lot, and I like him even more now,” he told Pierre Cabanne in 1967. (3) Duchamp never really explained what it was that made him like the work of Laforgue. In my opinion though, Laforgue’s work was of more importance for the development of Duchamp’s ideas than he himself acknowledged.

**Jules Laforgue**

Laforgue is generally seen as a representative of the decadent movement within Symbolism, which by 1880 had adherents among many young authors. The Decadents combined pessimism with black humor, self-mockery with irony. Their poems and novels clearly demonstrate a tendency towards literary innovation. Jules Laforgue (Montevideo 1860 – Paris 1887) was the second of eleven children. In 1877 his mother died of a miscarriage.
When his father decided to return to his hometown of Tarbes, Jules remained behind in Paris. He tried to write in order to earn a living. In 1881, he got a job as the personal reader of Empress Augusta of Prussia, and he moved to Berlin. There he worked on a series of poems called Les Complaintes. In the first months of 1885 Laforgue completed the stories that would later appear under the title Moralités légendaires. In 1886, he meets a young English woman, Leah Lee, and in December of that same year they marry. The couple settled in Paris. There Laforgue is forced to stay in bed because of his neglected health. While still looking for a publisher for a new book of poems and for his Moralités Légendaires on 20 August 1887 he dies of tuberculosis. (4)

Melancholy and celibacy

In his poems Laforgue again and again turns to the same motifs, melancholy and celibacy being the leading themes. Autumn is the blackest season, the moon is to be preferred to the sun and the sound of a distant piano brings about melancholic reflections on the sad future of young girls who will end up in the bourgeois trap of marriage. Marriage itself is often the theme of a poem ("Complainte des formalités nuptials," "Complainte des bons ménages"), as is the life of the bachelor ("Célibat, célibat, tout n'est que célibate," "Complaintes des crépuscules célibataires"). And looking at the score of poems in which Sundays are being described as days of boredom, Laforgue seems to have seen Sunday as the day par excellence for thoughts of spleen and melancholy (5).

Though he constantly emphasizes the loneliness and melancholy of the bachelor – the “pauvre jeune homme” – Laforgue’s poems and prose clearly speak of a preference for celibacy and for the bachelor state. He also proclaims rather peculiar ideas about women, love, or a relationship. His ideal seems to have been “love at a distance,” an unfulfilled or sterile love. In Saison, one of his unfinished novels, the protagonist is dreaming about his ideal woman: “The type of the adorable, the
only beloved, for me is the English woman (…) she is the only kind of woman that I cannot undress (…) My imagination remains sterile, frozen, has never existed, and has never brought me down. She has no sexual organs for me, I cannot think of it, could never have thought of it (…). All the others are bitches (…).” (6) In his wife Leah Lee, Laforgue apparently found the representative of his ideal woman, or the ideal of what he named “the third sex”: Lee was very skinny and very English, with her red hair, dark eyes, her baby figure, her timid nature and sophisticated, delicate mannerisms.

**Moralités Légendaires**

Besides poems Laforgue also produced some “prose poems.” These *Moralités légendaires* are rather humoristic. Their humoristic effects rest for the greater part on the ironic way Laforgue deals with his literary examples and with the symbolist stereotypes they contain. A good example is the “moral tale” Laforgue devotes to Salome. In symbolist literature this supposed daughter of the Jewish king Herod is often depicted as the epitome of the staggeringly beautiful, mysterious, sensual, and perfidious Goddess-Demon, who seduces men, only to plunge them into misery. As such she was portrayed by painters like Moreau, Redon, Regnault, and Beardsley, and described by Flaubert (in *Herodias*, 1877), Oscar Wilde (*Salome*, 1891-1893), and Mallarmé (*Hérodiade*, 1898).

Laforgue’s *Salomé* leans firmly on Flaubert’s *Herodiade*. But although he remains close to Flaubert’s text, which he sometimes paraphrases literally, Laforgue scoffs at Flaubert, for example with his preoccupation with historical accuracy (Flaubert relied on earlier historical sources, such as those of Flavius Josephus). The same goes for Flaubert’s style – so often praised. Laforgue sprinkles his story with ironic and anachronistic details. Herod Antipas is called Emeraude-Archetypas (Hérode = E(me)raude). (7) Iaokanaan (John the Baptist) – a strong personality in Flaubert’s story – is nothing more than a unsuccessful writer (a “malheureux
publiciste” or “écrivassier”, i.e., a potboiler or hack writer).
Laforgue’s story is not set in Biblical Palestine, but on one of the White Esoteric Iles (“Iles Blanches Esoteriques”), where even the noise of an express train is heard. In the palace Herod’s guests, “sur la scène de l’Alcazar” (i.e., a music hall), are being entertained by circus and vaudeville performers, including musical clowns with a street organ, an ice skater, and trapeze artists. Laforgue’s Salome, with her exaggerated manner of dress and childish acts, is almost a caricature, a mockery of the symbolist femme fatale. At the same time she seems to embody Laforgue’s female ideal: she hardly has any hips and breasts (“deux soupçons de seins”) and is more shy than tempting, indeed almost innocent (a “petite Immaculée-Conception”) – and much less a sex object than the Herodias (i.e. Salomé) of Flaubert. 

One of the other Moralités légendaires, Hamlet ou les suites de la piété filiale, deals rather effectively with another “hero” of Western literature. Hamlet obviously is one of Laforgue’s favorite plays and Hamlet one of his most beloved characters. (8) In literature, Hamlet is often portrayed as the prototype of the moon-sick melancholic, always hesitating and not able to act when he is called upon. Laforgue’s Hamlet though has nothing to do with Shakespeare’s melancholic dreamer. Although the sentences and statements of Laforgue’s Hamlet are reminiscent of Shakespeare (“Stabilité! Ton nom est femme”; “Mais ne plus être, ne plus y être, et ne plus être”), they remain an echo. Laforgue’s Hamlet hardly suffers from the fact that his father was murdered; instead he dreams of becoming a celebrated playwright. He is nothing more than a downright fool, who is proud of his clumsy choruses, as is demonstrated by the verse he recites: “Il était un corsage/et ron ron et petit pa ta pon/il était un corsage/qu’avait tous ses boutons.” (9)
Parody

Laforgue was one of the first poets who, at the end of the nineteenth century, felt that the existing modes of expression for the poet were obsolete and that there was a need for new ways of poetic expression. Parody for him was an important means to break away from existing literary conventions and poetical registers, and to introduce a new poetic language and innovative literary structures. Parody was an important instrument of *fumisme* and formed a significant part of the language of the *cabarets artistiques*. As Mary Shaw underlines in her essay on the literature of Montmartre, parody served a dual purpose: “Parodical markers generally signify breaks (…) with literary traditions at the same time that they forge links for initiated readers with a network or other contemporary, subversive, avant-garde texts.” (10) Using parody Laforgue rewrote and overwrote the “legendary stories” that served him as models. The distorted quotations from, and allusions to, classic writers (Shakespeare, Flaubert) contribute heavily to the parodical character of Laforgue’s stories.

Popular language

Laforgue’s poems and prose show the same characteristics as the songs, poems, and monologues that were presented in the *cabarets artistiques*. They are an often absurd blend of classical poetic language, nonsense rhymes and colloquial patches, peppered with exclamations, shouts and quotations from street and cabaret songs. (11) “Complainte du pauvre jeune homme” for instance sets off with the caption “Sur l’air populaire: Quand le bonhom’ revint du bois” (a song also known as “Le Bucheron de Bresse”). In the poem Laforgue reverts to practices used by singers and poets in the *cabarets artistiques*: a repetition of words or lines (the line “Quand ce jeune homm’ rentra chez lui” is used twice), elision (homm’
instead of *homme*) and the use of nonsense or nursery rhyme ("Digue dondaine, digue dondon"). (12)
The rhyme in Laforgue’s poetry and prose often rests on comparable sound effects. Typical is his frequent use of assonance and alliteration – which especially in free verse are important forms of rhyme. A few examples from *Moralités légendaires*. In the first *b* and *s* are repeated: “Dans un coin obscur d’une tribune, Hamlet dont nul jamais ne s’ inquiète, assis sur un coussin, observe la salle et la scène par les baies de la balustrade” (*Hamlet*). The second example centres on the repetition of the *f/v*-sound, the *c* and the *l*, with the “o” as a resounding vowel: and: “Et sur cette folle petite ville et son cercle de collines, le ciel infini dont on fait son deuil, ces éphémères féminines ne sortant jamais, en effet, sans mettre une frivole ombrelle entre elles et Dieu” (*Miracles des roses*). Sound for Laforgue is seemingly more important than significance: “Que je vous baisotte les mains, ô Kate, pour cette etiquette’ (*Hamlet*); “unique titre de Tétraque”; “une salle jonchée de joncs jaune jonquille” (*Salomé*). (13)As was the habit in the cabarets, Laforgue frequently reverts to popular expressions and exclamations, to argot and vulgar words (*s’en ficher, s’engueuler*). He invents new words or verbs (*angeluser* or *ventriloquer*, *voluptuer*, *massacrileger*) and uses mots-valises or port-manteau words to intensify the sense of the emotions he wants to convey (*crucifiger* as a speaking combination of *crucifier* and *figer*; *éternullite* as an – again very expressive – combination of *éternité* and *nullité*; *violuptés* as a combination of *volupté* and *viol*; *ennuiverselles* from *ennui* and *universelles*). In addition to “modern” words or (often incongruous) combinations (*thermomètre, rails, capitaliste, laminé, transatlantiques bercails, spleens or ennui kilométriques*) he sprinkles his poems with non-poetical, technical, biological or medical expressions (*polype, apoplectique, spectroscope, télescope, plasma* or *chlorose, to denote the pallor of unhealthy adolescent girls*). (14)
Duchamp and Laforgue

For Duchamp getting acquainted with the work of Laforgue was of special importance for the development of his ideas. To Cabanne he stated that he especially liked Laforgue’s short stories, not just because of their humor, but also because they were something completely new: “I’m not acquainted with Laforgue’s life. […]. That didn’t interest me enormously. But the prose poems in *Moralités légendaires*, which were as poetic as his poems, had really interested me very much. It was like an exit from Symbolism.” (15)

Without any doubt it was especially the parodical character of the *Moralités légendaires* that appealed to Duchamp. Besides that he must also have picked up some of the innovative aspects of Laforgue’s poetry that were linked to the artistic climate in Montmartre.

Duchamp in Montmartre

Duchamp came to live in Montmartre in 1904, with his brother Raymond in the rue Caulaincourt. Their elder brother Jacques Villon lived in the same street. Even though the Duchamp brothers associated themselves with other painters, e.g. in the Société Normande de Peinture Moderne, and showed their work on “alternative” exhibitions like the Salon des Indépendants and the Salon d’Automne, in Montmartre they spent most of their time in quite different circles, in the company of illustrators and cartoonists. Like them, the brothers of Duchamp earned their money primarily by producing cartoons for Parisian humoristic journals. According to Duchamp there was little or no contact between them and the artistic avant-garde: “Remember that I wasn’t living among painters, but rather among cartoonists. In Montmartre, where I was living, rue Caulaincourt, next door to Villon, we associated with Willette, Léandre, Abel Faivre, Georges Huard etc., this was completely different; I wasn’t in contact with the painters at
that time.” (16)
Although they were working as commercial artists, Duchamp’s brothers had not given up hope to be recognized as serious artists. Duchamp on the other hand had no clear goal. He tried his luck at the exam for admittance to the École des Beaux Arts and failed, attended some of the classes at the Académie Julian, but confessed later he preferred to play billiards at a local café, and evaded a three year conscription in the army, posing as an ouvrier d’art and learning the art of print-making in an atelier in Rouen.

Duchamp had been drawing domestic scenes, portraits of family members or friends and everyday scenes of passers-by or street strollers from early on. After his return to Montmartre and following the example of his brothers, he produced another series of drawings and cartoons, often with the relations between men and women as a theme. A good example is Sundays (Dimanches, 1909): a fairly common scene of a young man, pushing a baby carriage, with next to him his wife, again heavy with child. The plural in the title not only refers to the endless repetition of dreary Sundays with their common family scenes, but also to the cycle
of the seemingly joyless repetition this marriage is subject to. *Dimanches* could very well echo Laforgue’s melancholic poems about dreary Sundays.

Some of the cartoons Duchamp produced were published in humoristic magazines such as *Le Rire* and the *Courrier français* and were shown at the Salons des Humoristes that were organized from 1907 on. The captions of these cartoons are full of sexual innuendo and show that Duchamp had a keen eye for puns and *double entendres*. (17)

*An “intellectual” artist*
he picked up painting again around 1907, Duchamp’s ideas, in no way, fitted in with the usual pattern of a “serious” artist. He went rapidly through successive stages of the new movements in painting – Fauvism, “Cézannism” – as if he couldn’t decide what style suited him. In 1911, he painted the first works that show the influence of Cubism. He also participated in discussions about Cubism with his brothers and other painters of a cubist group that had formed around the painters Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger. But he did not stick to Cubism, either. He was searching for an art that differed fundamentally from what had been produced up to the 1910s. As he stated later, painters until then had exclusively focused on “retinal” effects. In the course of the nineteenth century the “physical” side of painting had increasingly been emphasized, which had resulted in a one-sided production of “pleasant” or “attractive” images of art, solely appealing to the senses. According to Duchamp, art had thus lost its “intellectual” (religious, historical, or literary) content. Even new movements such as (Neo)Impressionism, Futurism, or Cubism were mainly producing “physical” paintings. Duchamp deliberately searched for other ways: “I wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting. […] I was interested in ideas – not merely in visual products. I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind.”(18)

The decisive breaking point is well-known. In March 1912, Duchamp planned to show his freshly painted *Nu descendant un escalier* at the Salon des Indépendants, together with other members of the cubist group. Gleizes and Metzinger disapproved of the direction Duchamp had taken with his *Nu* and asked Duchamp’s brothers if they could persuade Duchamp to remove his “moving” nude. (19) This incident proved to Duchamp that the painters milieu, even that of the avant-garde, had little to offer to him. He therefore sought his inspiration elsewhere. Duchamp had a clear mind for innovation, both in the field of the visual arts and in the fields of science, language, and literature. The cartoons he produced were proof of his interest in language, in the possibilities of wordplay.
and puns, corresponding with the products of cartoonists and writers who moved around in the artistic circles of Montmartre. And although he did not read a lot, his literary favorites were the more experimental symbolist authors such as Mallarmé. Duchamp’s attitude was quickly assessed as “intellectual” and “literary,” but that did not bother him. “I felt that as a painter it was much better to be influenced by a writer than by another painter,” he stated.

Although his literary favorites were to be found among the more “difficult” symbolist writers, Duchamp (as he stated to Pierre Cabanne) preferred authors who offered an exit from symbolism. Like Raymond Roussel and Jean Paul Brisset (two authors Duchamp admired because of their “insane imagination”). Laforgue evaded the prevailing taste: he offered Duchamp the exit he was searching for. Duchamp must have been receptive to Laforgue’s ironic tone and the way this “decadent-symbolist” author exploited and ridiculed symbolist stereotypes. And more than Laforgue’s obvious themes (melancholy about human existence in the light of eternity, celibacy, unattainable love, and – almost consequently – sterility), Duchamp recognized the irony in the way Laforgue turned melancholy and self-pity into (black) humor. Besides that he must have felt attracted to the way Laforgue transformed common language into poetry, to his frequent use of dissonant words or expressions in a poetic context and to his extravagant titles: “But perhaps I was less attracted by Laforgue’s poetry than by his titles. ‘Comice agricole,’ when written by Laforgue, becomes poetry.”

The full title of the poem Duchamp refers to reads “Complainte du soir des comices agricoles” (“Complaint of the Evening of the Agricultural show”). Laforgue’s poem describes the depressing behavior of farmers and their ladies, who have great difficulty giving themselves over to dancing and fun. The poet therefore dresses up in melancholic thoughts about
the human race and the planet it is living on: “Oh Terre, ô terre, ô race humaine, / vous me faites bien de la peine.” (O Earth, o human race, it is quite a pain you give me.”) Apart from the poetic effects of assonance and alliteration (co-co-co) the title of the poem is rather unusual. Nobody normally associates a farmers fair (“comice agricole”) with melancholy or other poetic feelings. Laforgue reverts quite happily to the use of such dissonances. Apparently, this use of dissonance attracted Duchamp too.

**Motion instead of emotion**

In 1911 Duchamp decided to illustrate some of Laforgue’s poems. The drawings bear the same titles as the poems, all from Laforgue’s first bundle *Le Sanglot de la Terre* (published posthumously in 1901): Médiocrité, Sieste éternelle, and Encore à cet astre (though the drawings bear the indication “12” and “13” they all date from 1911).(24) Remarkably enough, the content of Laforgue’s poems seem to have little or no direct connection with the subject Duchamp chose to depict in his drawings. Sieste éternelle shows a section of a piano keyboard, possibly referring to the verse: “Et comme un piano voisin rêve en mesure/je tournoie au concert rythmé des encensoirs.” (“And like a piano close by that dreams in scales / so I move around
on the rhythmic concert of the incense burners"). In Laforgue’s Complaintes the piano is often used as a signal of wistful longing. In “Complainte des pianos qu’on entend dans les quartiers aisés,” for example, the poet is strolling through a rich residential area. Through the windows of the houses he hears the sound of endless rows of scales that are being practiced by young girls. The gray and boring life of these girls, who are all eagerly looking forward to a future lover, leaps to his mind, and he imagines how the monotonous life of these young girls eventually and inevitably will pass into the meager routine of married life. Duchamp’s drawing, however, doesn’t convey anything of these melancholic thoughts. It leaves the viewer in the dark as far as its meaning is concerned.

Médiocrité shows something that looks like a steam locomotive with wagons trailing behind. In Laforgue’s sonnet such a machine is nowhere to be found. Laforgue deplores the mediocrity of most people, who toil and slave endlessly and without joy, and suspect nothing of the nullity (the éternullité) of the planet Earth in light of eternity. The only possible connection between poem and drawing is the last line of the poem (“Combien même s’en vont/Sans avoir seulement visité leur planète”; “How many take their leave/without even having visited their planet”). This line could have brought Duchamp the idea of a train – and possibly the idea of motion, instead of emotion. Encore à cet astre (“Once more to this star”; to be understood as an address to the sun) gave Duchamp
the idea for *Nu descendant un escalier* (*Nude Descending a Staircase*, 1911):

The idea of the *Nude* came from a drawing which I had made in 1911 to illustrate Jules Laforgue’s poem *Encore à cet astre*. I had planned a series of illustrations of Laforgue’s poems, but I only completed three of them. […] In the drawing *Encore à cet astre* the figure is, of course, mounting the stairs. But while working on it, the idea of the *Nude*, or the title – I do not recall which – first came to my mind. (25)

Duchamp’s drawing again doesn’t contain much of which Laforgue is speaking. The poem reads as an imaginary dialogue between the sun and the people on earth. The sun (for Laforgue often a symbol of a dying force) expresses its contempt with those damned animated puppets (“pantins morphines”) down there on Earth. The earthlings, however, challenge the sun and point to its damned fate: it is at the end of its strength, its beams will inevitably grow cold, and it will be the laughing stock of the other stars. They, however, even if they are young, “die of health.”

In Duchamp’s drawing we see a
floating head, as a sort of reference to Odilon Redon, between
two figures. On the left a (apparently) female figure, naked
from the waist down, surmounted by a cylindrical shape; on the
right another (male? female?) figure, climbing a flight of
stairs. (26) The pronounced teeth of the floating head could
be taken as a reference to one of the lines in the poem ("Toi
seul claques des dents"); "Only you clack your teeth").
Graphically, there is a connection with two earlier
(realistic) nudes Duchamp drew, rather unusually sitting or
resting on a ladder. (27) Maybe Duchamp got the idea of
setting a (rudimentary or puppet-like) nude in motion, walking
on a flight of stairs, from Laforgue’s description of the sun
high up in the sky, talking to human puppets down below. Be
that as it may, Duchamp probably drew more inspiration from
the idea of movement (up-down) in Laforgue’s poem, than from
its actual (emotional, i.e. melancholic) content.

Duchamp’s drawings after the poetry of Laforgue signify an
important turning point in his work and thinking. As
indicated, around 1911 Duchamp was searching to break free
from the art of tradition, but also from the work of Cézanne
and the Fauves, which until then had served him as an example.
He experimented with techniques he had taken from Cubism, but
was also inspired by the art of Symbolism – a symbolism
embodied in paintings such as Buisson (The Bush, 1910-1911).
When asked about the title of this painting, Duchamp stated he
added the title (Buisson) "as an invisible color." (28) He
felt he needed “a raison d’être in a painting that was
different from the visual experience," as a means of “giving a
work that contained no anecdote an anecdotal element.” (29) “A
poetic title for a painting was an anathema in the Fauves
period, and was dismissed as literature,” he stated later.
(30) In symbolist art such a “suggestive” title was not
unusual. (31)

By giving paintings such as Buisson symbolic titles, Duchamp
tried to lend these rather traditional nudes (they are more or
less Fauvist nudes) a meta-realistic touch, purely because he
felt the need to step away from their being too realistic. The next step would even lead him away from the idea of giving his paintings “symbolist” titles. He started experimenting with setting his subjects in motion. Encore à cet astre must have played a central part in this development. About the genesis of this drawing Duchamp explained to Cabanne: “(the origin is) in the nude itself. To do a different nude from the classic reclining or standing nude, and to put it in motion.” (32) Motion (or the suggestion of motion) as a subject thus was becoming more and more important, and certainly more important than emotion.

**Melancholy?**

In December 1911, Duchamp painted *Jeune homme triste dans un train* (Sad Young Man in a Train) and, in the same month, the first study for *Nu descendant un escalier*. Michel Sanouillet has suggested that *Jeune homme triste dans un train* was based on a lost sketch, belonging to the series of illustrations to poems of Laforgue that Duchamp had planned to do. According to Sanouillet the original title of *Jeune homme triste dans un train* would have read *Pauvre jeune homme M*: “precisely the name of one of Laforgue’s *Complaintes*.” The Laforgue poem Sanouillet refers to tells the sad but hilarious story of a young man who finds out his wife has left him for another, laments his fate, and in despair finally cuts his throat. (33). If Sanouillet is right about Duchamp’s first idea for a title, the M would have given his painting a personal touch (M being an indication for ‘Marcel’). Unfortunately, there is no M in the title of the Laforgue poem. (34)
Several interpreters (Arturo Schwarz, Lawrence D. Steefel, Jerrold B. Seigel, John Golding) have tried to link *Jeune homme triste dans un train* to Duchamp’s melancholic mood at the end of 1911 and have suggested that this painting could point to an influence from Laforgue’s poems. (35) John Golding for instance sees something of the “bleak, quizzical despair” in Duchamp’s painting which characterizes the Laforgue poem. Duchamp’s painting is what he calls a “mood painting”: “The Nude Descending is in no way a tragic painting (…). Yet the debt to Laforgue exists in the sensation or pervasive melancholy which the canvas transmits.” (36). According to Golding the relationship between *Jeune homme triste dans un train* and *Nu descendant un escalier* is reinforced by the fact that Duchamp painted black borders in both paintings. Duchamp himself, however, always rejected a “melancholic” interpretation of *Jeune homme triste dans un train*. He acknowledged that the painting was a self-portrait (a pipe, hardly visible, should be an indication), but when Robert Lebel asked him if the
black borders are to be seen as an atmospheric sketch of his mood at that moment, Duchamp with his usual aplomb stated that “the black frames in Jeune homme triste only served to bring the painting back to the right dimensions.” (37)

It is rather unlikely that Duchamp intended Jeune homme triste dans un train to be “a mood painting.” If he had wanted the title to be read as a reference to an autobiographical fact and as an indication of a melancholy mood he could indeed have added the “M” Sanouillet is referring to. Duchamp himself particularly stressed the role of the train-triste alliteration in the title: “The Sad Young Man on a Train already showed my intention of introducing humor into painting or, in this case, the humor of word play: triste, train. […] The young man is sad because there is a train that comes afterward. ‘Tr’ is very important.” (38)

In other words, Duchamp chose the word “triste” (sad) because it worked beautifully with “train,” or better because the word “train” trails after, entraînes the word “triste.”

**Dissonances**

As his early drawings and cartoons show, and as is evident in his work after 1911, Duchamp was very aware of the possible use of “literary” (or poetic) effects in his search for an art that differed from traditional art. Duchamp had always been interested in word games and was trained in the use of calembours and words with double meanings. It could not have escaped him that Laforgue regularly made use of the humorous and ironic effects of dissonant words and expressions in his poems. The irony and humor in Laforgue’s poems mainly resides in the collision of two traditionally opposing verbal registers: on the one hand, the (traditional) poetical register, and on the other, the register of spoken language and language used in new areas of communication. His poetry takes its ironic character primarily from the dissonances between these two different linguistic sources. And Duchamp must have noticed that he could do something similar in the
In the titles of his work after 1911, Duchamp sometimes falls back on the same effects as Laforgue. When asked about the word “vite” in the title of Le roi et la reine traversés par des nus vites (The King and Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes, 1912), Duchamp stated that this word amused him, because at that time it was new and modern, and was only used in sports, e.g. as an indication for a cyclist, a racing driver or an athlete: “if a man was ‘swift,’ he ran well.” (39) Titles like Jeune homme triste dans un train, Deux personnages et une auto (Two Characters and a Car, 1912), Le roi et la reine entourés des nus vites (The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes, 1912), Le roi et la reine traversés par des nus en vitesse (The King and Queen Traversed by Nudes at High Speed, 1912), or Le roi et la reine traversés par des nus vites (The King and Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes, 1912) with their unusual dissonances (a combination of a word deriving from the world of mechanics or sports and from more traditional registers), definitely have Laforgian traces. And the title of Duchamp’s 1914 drawing Avoir l’apprenti dans le soleil (To Have the Apprentice in the Sun), in which we see a bicyclist frantically working his way up a slope, would not have seemed out of place amongst the titles of Laforgue’s poems.

**Assonance and alliteration**

In addition, Duchamp must have noted that in his (free) verse and his prose Laforgue frequently made use of alliteration and assonance as a remplaçant for more conventional rhyme. As is obvious from his statement about the word play “triste/train” Duchamp was sensitive to such literary effects. He was without any doubt amused by the tonal qualities of the work of Laforgue, for instance, by the (alliterative and assonant) effects of choruses such as “digue dondaine, digue dondon” or the use of assonance and elision (bonhomm’) in poems like “Complainte du pauvre jeune homme” – lines and words that referred to the popular song the poem is based upon, echoing
the practices used in the cabarets artistiques. Talking about the poetry of Mallarmé, Duchamp stated that it wasn’t so much the content or the construction of the verses that attracted him, but the “sonorité” – the sound. For Duchamp Mallarmé’s poetry was primarily a “poésie audible” (poetry to be listened at): “Since I don’t completely understand him [Mallarmé], I find him very pleasurable to read for sound, as poetry that you hear,” he said to Cabanne. (40)

In his works after 1911, Duchamp frequently fell back on the poetical effects of alliteration and assonance. A title such as Le roi et la reine traversés par des nus vites derives its poetic effect from the repeating of the “r” and the “a”; in La Mariee mise à nu par ses célibataires, même, the “m” is repeated, as it is in Neuf Moules Mâlic (mâlic being a neologism). (41)

In naming the different parts of The Large Glass, Duchamp made use of similar effects. Témoins oculistes is another example of a neologism, and assonance is present in titles such as Glissière contenant un moulin à eau en métaux voisins (“eau” rhyming on “métaux” and “o”), and alliteration in Dynamo désir or in L’Enfant-phare. Moreover, Duchamp, especially in later ready-mades, frequently fell back on the humoristic power of mots-valises or port-manteau words (Fresh Widow, La Bagarre d’Austerlitz).

**The influence of Laforgue**

In Nu descendant un escalier Duchamp united a principle he borrowed from Laforgue: to bring together two elements (nude – staircase) that in traditional terms do not mutually “rhyme.” He added a novelty of his own, namely the liberation of the nude from her traditional frameworks: he painted a moving nude instead of a stationary nude, a nude that “descends,” instead of reclining or standing. It is this idea of motion or movement – not in an emotional sense, but in an intellectual sense – that he developed in several works after 1911, culminating in La Mariee mise à nu par ses célibataires, même.
in his ready-mades. In these works, he concentrated not on a pictorial (static) scene, but on a mental idea, using the artwork as a means to convey the idea of a world in motion, a constant flux or a coming-and-going of appearances. Duchamp picked up another idea from Laforgue. In his poems, Laforgue often attributes life to lifeless objects or abstractions, thereby augmenting the ironic quality of his poems (See, for example, “Complainte du foetus de poète,” “Complainte du vent qui s'ennuie la nuit,” and “Complainte des débats mélancoliques et littéraires”). Similar (Laforgian) irony speaks from phrases and titles for parts of *La Mariee mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*, such as *Handler of gravity* (Manieur de gravité, also named *Tender of Gravity* – Soigneur de gravité – or *Juggler of gravity* – Jongleur de gravité). Here Duchamp plays on the double meaning of the word *gravity*: weight or gravitation on the one hand, and seriousness on the other. The irony is of course present in the idea that you can “juggle” with gravity – an idea Duchamp illustrated in his concept of objects “made of a substance of oscillating density,” such as the Hook or the Chariot in the Big Glass (42) – or that you can tend to (“take care of,” or “look out for”) gravity. The same goes for the attribution of human emotions to some of the mechanical devises in *The Large Glass* (a chariot with a “slow” or “celibate life,” a motor with “a desire center”). When it comes to the intrinsic themes that Duchamp might have found in the work of Laforgue, it is not so much the theme of melancholy but another theme that jumps out. Laforgue frequently refers to his dislike of *bourgeois* marriage, especially where sex is concerned as a mere means to acquire offspring. Instead of “love in the service of reproduction” as the above quotation about his perfect English girl illustrates, Laforgue finds the ultimate ideal in selfless, sterile love. Duchamp in his turn repeatedly and emphatically manifested his aversion to marriage as a social institution and his preference for the status of the bachelor. Duchamp’s early
drawings are not only interesting because of the combination of text and image and the use of *calembours* or sexual innuendo in the captions, but also because of their themes. Many of these early drawings provide an ironic view on the concerns of courtship, the period of engagement, and the routine of married life. (43) They can thus be seen as an early ruling against (civil) marriage and as a celebration of the state of bachelor (or – for that matter – of unmarried cohabitation). His drawing *Dimanches* can be seen as an early manifestation of this conviction. The theme of his *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* seems to be partly based on the same idea of (sterile) love; on the idea of the fundamental impossibility of the union of bachelor and bride, even though they mutually undergo the effects of desire for the other. Where Duchamp speaks of the *Large Glass* as a “negation of the woman,” it was the negation of the woman as a wife/mother he focused upon, as the person who assists in the continuation of social life and the (mechanical) producing of social individuals over and over again. (44)

That is not to say that Duchamp’s work can be interpreted as an expression of the “eternal” opposition between the masculine and the feminine, which is the theme of many symbolist works of art. Duchamp does not tackle the (eternal) male-female opposition, but his work does challenge the opposition husband vs. wife/mother.

It could well have been the introduction of popular material in a poetic context, the use of newly formed words and the playing on their incongruity (this diversion from traditional poetical standards) that put Duchamp on the trail of comparable methods to undermine existing codes and registers in the visual arts. Laforgue was one of the first modern poets who used words that stem from such non-poetical arsenals as trade, (natural) science, traffic, slang and popular songs. With his introduction of neologisms and non-poetical words and phrases he gave an example of increased lexical and linguistic choices for the poet.
Laforgue’s idea of using dissonances in order to pervert the traditional poetic language has a clear counterpart in the work of Duchamp, both in his early work and in his ready-mades. As is the case with Laforgue, Duchamp reverted to a process of dissociation: he isolated words (or sounds) and objects from their habitual (grammatical, logical) context and presented them in another context. By painting simple and everyday objects, such as *Coffee Mill* or *Chocolate Grinder*, he introduced mechanical devices as legitimate subjects for art works. This practice eventually gave way to simply “choosing” ordinary objects and, by giving them a poetic (often ambiguous) title, elevating them to genuine art works (*In Advance of the Broken Arm*, *Trébuchet/Trap*). With his genuine ready-mades – *Fountain* being the most famous – he went one step further. By isolating an ordinary object – a urinal – from its normal context (the public restroom) and by introducing it in a surrounding where it is definitely out of place (the gallery or museum) he expanded the artistic methods and materials and took them to until then uncharted realms.

**Conclusion**

Laforgue was one of the first modern poets who demonstrated an ambivalent-melancholic attitude towards language and poetry. Thus, in “Complainte des Blackboulés” it is said that “she” (a “coeur rose”) has spat on the Arts and the poet. In the poem a poet complains about the fact that art is mocked and attacked – while Laforgue himself is doing nothing different, by mocking all that has been seen as sacred in poetry. It is a melancholic attitude, because the poet realizes that there is little else to do, that writing has become a ridiculous, pointless activity – “Ah! Qu’est-ce que je fais, ici, dans cette chambre!/Des vers. Et puis, après?” (“Ah, what am I doing sticking around indoors! Verse. And then, what after that?”), *Complainte d’une autre dimanche* – but that he can do nothing else. Laforgue hides behind the ironic nonchalance with which he ridicules poetry, rhetoric, literary themes or motifs – but
he still writes poetry! In that sense he distinguishes himself from the pranksters, who were also to be found amongst the Hydropathes and other Fumistes. Where some of these poets-singers were aiming to ridicule Literature – as an example of what was called “the established order” – Laforgue was looking for an answer to the question which way poetry could go, while rejecting the path of traditional rhetoric or of legendary themes. The work of Laforgue may in many respects be similar to that of the Fumistes, the difference is in what Laforgue aimed at. He was not aiming at the joke “for the joke’s sake.” Or, in the words of Grojnowski: “Se voutant à la quête d’une manière ‘clownesque’, il inaugure une esthétique de la disparate où, selon ses propres termes, les dictionnaires ‘se brouillent’.” (45). Duchamp recognized and appreciated the irony of Laforgue, which is akin to his “ironie d’affirmation,” with a slight but important difference; unlike Laforgue there is, in the case of Duchamp, no question of black vision or melancholy. He approaches his subjects in a “dry” and “neutral” way.

Instead of a well-established, traditional style, Laforgue sought a new style of his own, an idiolect, a language offering space to the everyday, spoken word – a style that is not only related to the style of the authors who frequented the Parisian cabarets artistiques and that of innovative authors such as Mallarmé, but can be regarded as a harbinger of the style of modern writers such as Céline and Queneau. It is this ambivalent attitude – rejecting the (old) poetry but simultaneously seeking a way to save poetry by looking for new ways – that Duchamp has in common with Laforgue. Duchamp is not so much the Dadaist, who only rejects. He is much more like Laforgue, someone who is “looking for a way out” – looking for new ways for the arts to go in a changing society. That is what is behind Duchamp’s judgment about the work of Laforgue: “It was like an exit from symbolism.” Laforgue helped Duchamp to find his way out in his “ironisme d’affirmation,” in his Large Glass, and in his readymades.
Notes:

1. Daniel Grojnowski, talking about the Incohérents, has pointed out that their activities can be interpreted as being a sort of proto-Dada. ‘Une trentaine d’années avant que n’éclatent les scandales provoqués par la jeunesse de l’après-guerre, qui, vers 1920, a transformé de manière sans doute irréversible notre perception de l’œuvre, les Incohérents ont, pour une bonne part, inventé ‘dada’ avant la lettre, sans avoir trouvé [...] la reconnaissance qui aurait consacré leurs recherches. En somme, ils ont formé une avant-garde sans avancée, une provocation artistique sans prise qui, faute de s’être imposée, demeure un simple objet de curiosité.’ Daniel Grojnowski, Aux commencements du rire moderne. L’esprit fumiste (Paris: Corti, 1997), 255-256.


1. Des fleurs de bonne volonté, for instance, contains thirteen poems with “Dimanche” in their title, for a total of 56 poems.

1. “Le type de l’adorable, de l’aimée unique, pour moi est par exemple l’anglaise [...]. Elle est la seule race de femme que je ne parvienne pas à déshabiller. [...] Mon imagination reste stérile, gelée, n’a jamais existé, ne m’a pas dégradé [...]. Elle n’a pas pour moi d’organes sexuels, je n’y songe pas, il me serait impossible d’y songer. [...] Toutes les autres sont des chiennes.” Feuilles volantes, in: Jules Laforgue, Oeuvres Complètes, Vol. 3 (Lausanne: L’Age des Hommes, 2000), 960-961.

1. A typical Laforgian play-on-words. The first part of the name refers to the preference Flaubert puts on sparkling gems, the second part is an ironic
reference to the – supposedly – “archetypal” character of Herod.

1. Laforgue often reverts to quotes from Shakespeare’s Hamlet, using them as a motto for his poems. In Des Fleurs de bonne volonté, eleven out of 56 poems have a motto taken from Hamlet. He uses these quotes regularly in connection with other recurring themes that for him represent melancholy: Sundays, moonlight, sterility, autumn.

1. This refrain, echoing the practices of the cabaret artistique, is taken from a French nursery song: “Il était un’ bergère’/Et ron et ron, petit patapon/Il était un’ bergère/Qui gardait ses moutons/Ron, ron/Qui gardait ses moutons.

1. Cate and Shaw, 128. Laforgue’s “L’Hiver qui vient” is a good example of this dual objective. “What is often overlooked, however, is that this poem, far from emerging as a work of solitary genius, exemplifies a general context of innovation,” says Shaw (Cate and Shaw 1996, 129). The title of the poem echoes the beginning of a poem by Raoul Ponchon from the Album zutique (1871): “V’la l’hiver et ses guenilles/Un’saison qu’est emmerdant!”, (with the characteristic elision “V’la” instead of “Voila”) and the opening lines of Jehan Rictus’ “L’Hiver” (from Les Soliloques du Pauvre, first performed in cabaret Les Quat’z’Arts in 1895): “Merd’! V ’là l’Hiver et ses dur’tés/V’là l’moment de n’plus s’mettre à poils.” And the first word of Rictus’ poem again raises an
echo: of the first word of Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* namely, the play that knew its premiere a year after Rictus first performed his poem.

1. Two other examples. “Complainte de cette bonne lune” sets off with a variant on the popular song “Sur le pont d’Avignon” and “Complainte de Lord Pierrot” with an adaptation of the more well-known “Au clair de la lune”: “Au clair de la lune/Mon ami Pierrot/Filons en costume/Présider là-haut!/Ma cervelle est morte/Que le Christ l’emporte/Béons à la Lune/La bouche en zéro (...).” Typical in this last poem is the combination of the moon (lune) with Pierrot. Pierrot is, next to Hamlet, the character who for Laforgue embodies the theme of melancholy. In late nineteenth century literature, Pierrot served as the epitome of the melancholic: he is the enemy of the sun, and – consequently – a lunatic.

In 1882 Laforgue borrowed the title of one of Adolphe Willette’s famous Pierrot cartoons, *Pierrot fumiste*, for a play of his own. The Pierrot of Laforgue mocks marriage and wedding nights and proclaims a love that must remain sterile. Notwithstanding he marries. On his wedding night he smothers his bride with kisses, but otherwise doesn’t touch her, and goes to sleep. The next day she is still a virgin. The same thing happens every night. As the months pass, what the family mistook for delicacy becomes cause for concern. The doctor who is finally brought in warns Pierrot that others could rob him of what he despises in his wife. Pierrot then brutally assails her and sets off immediately afterwards – not as someone who has failed, but as someone who punishes his wife: she has spurned
true love and exchanged it for the profane sexual act.

For Pierrot fumiste see:
http://www.laforgue.org/Pierrot.htm

2. The lines “digue dondaine, digue dondon” refer to a popular song from the operetta Les Cloches De Corneville by Robert Planquette, that is supposed to suggest the ringing of church bells: “Digue, digue, digue, digue dong/Sonne, sonne, sonne, sonne dong/Digue, digue, digue, digue donc/Sonne, sonne, sonne donc, joyeux carillon.” The singer Jules Jouy referred to the same song in his “Le Reveillon des Gueux.” See: Segel, 37-38 and http://kropot.free.fr/JJouy.htm#GUEUX

To give an example of a Chat Noir poem with similar characteristics, some lines from “Faculté des sciences du Chat Noir” by Alphonse Allais: “(Air connu): L’azote est un gaz bien malain/Dans l’quel on n’peut pas vivre/Il se trouv’ dans l’air le plus sain/C’est pas lui qui enivre,/Il n’a pas le moindre action,/La faridondaine, la faridondon,/Il empêche la vie/Biribi/A la façon de Barbari, mon ami.” See: André Velter, Les Poètes du Chat Noir (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 124-125.

1973), 105-119.


1. Cabanne, 30.

1. Cabanne, 22.

1. E.g., *Femme Cocher* (Woman Hack Driver, 1907), *At the Palais the Glace* (1909), *Future Mother-in-law* (1909), *Nuit Blanche* (Sleepless Night, 1909), *Vice sans fin* (Endless Vice, 1909) and *Chamber Music* (1910). See: Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 1997), volume 2: no’s 102, 144, 146, 150, 155 and 173). The pun in *Femme cocher* rests on the (homophonic) ambiguity of the title: *femme cocher/femme couché* (woman coach driver/woman who is making love); the running meter of the coach in front of an hotel and the indication 6969 on the lantern on the coach are allusions to the activities the coach driver and her client are involved in.

2. *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 125.
The question remains what Gleizes and Metzinger may have incited to reject Duchamp’s *Nude*. For the Cubists the painted object functioned as an ‘anchor’ for the sum of (sensory) experiences. Duchamp had reduced the object – in this case the nude – to a transient flux. But perhaps there was still another reason for their refusal. Gleizes and Metzinger seem to have thought that Duchamp’s *Nude* wore a too literary title for a cubist painting. The title would have reduced the painting to a caricature. Funny enough Duchamp’s brothers suggested him to at least change the title of his painting, but that was utterly impossible: Duchamp had painted the title directly on the canvas. The title was, in other words, an integral part of the work.

Michel Sanouillet has rightly pointed out the importance of what he calls the ‘popular tradition’ for a good understanding of Duchamp’s ideas: “What sets Duchamp apart [from contemporary avant-garde artists] (…) is the fact that he was led to move in a particular milieu, among the journalists, cartoonists, and artisans of Paris, more than among the fashionable painters and men of letters. Thus he kept close to a French oral tradition that manifests itself in a thousand different ways in the life of the average Parisian: argot, vulgar words, “in” jokes, puns, the language of pamphlets, ads, almanacs etc.” Michel Sanouillet, “Marcel Duchamp and the French Intellectual Tradition”: Anne d’Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, eds., *Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, Philadelphia: Philadelphia
1. The Writings of Marcel Duchamp, 124.

In his notes Duchamp refers to the Large Glas as a “machine agricole” or “instrument aratoire” (an “agricultural machine”). See: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp, 44.

1. Apparently, Duchamp wasn’t very precise when it came down to signing and dating the drawings. In the case of Encore à cet astre, for instance, he only the added the indication ‘13’ with the caption ‘très cordialement’ when he offered the drawing to F.C. Torrey.

1. The Writings of Marcel Duchamp, 124. In his conversations with Cabanne Duchamp states that he made about ten drawings, but he suggests to ignore where even the three that are known have gone to. See The Writings of Marcel Duchamp, 30.

1. As has been suggested, the relation between drawing and poem could be found in the similarity between the French word astre (star) and the English stare/stair. See for instance: B. Bailey, “Once More to this Staircase: Another Look at
Encore à cet Astre,” Tout Fait, The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal, 2, No. 4. For me, it seems unlikely that Duchamp intended such a relation, considering that he mastered the English language only after 1915, during his stay in the United States.


1. “The presence of a non-descriptive title is shown here for the first time. In fact, from then on, I always gave an important role to the title which I added and treated like an invisible color.” Duchamp, in: d’Harnoncourt and McShine, 249.

2. In a letter of 1951 to Mary Ann Adler, quoted in d’Harnoncourt and McShine, 249.


2. Compare for instance Odilon Redon’s works with titles such as Les origins, Esprit de la fôret or La folie, Gustave Moreau’s Les Voix or Félicien Rops’ Parodie humaine.

1. Cabanne, 30.

1. The first stanza of the poem reads: “Quand ce
jeune homm’ rentra chez lui (2x)/Il prit à deux mains son vieux crâne/Que de science était un puits!/Crâne/Riche crane/Entends tu la Folie qui plane/Et qui demande le cordon/Digue dondaine, digue dondon.” (this last line 2x).

1. Michel Sanouillet, “Marcel Duchamp and the French intellectual tradition,” d’Harnoncourt and McShine, 50. It is interesting to note that this misreading of Laforgue’s title pops up almost everywhere in the Duchamp-literature. Even Calvin Tomkins, who sacrifices two pages of his Duchamp 1996 biography to Duchamp’s interest in Laforgue (he rightly stresses the point that Duchamp “had a particular liking for the prose narratives that Laforgue calles Moralités legendaires”, amongst which Hamlet was Duchamp’s favorite), fails to see that the title of Laforgue’s poem reads simply ‘Complainte du pauvre jeune homme’. See: Calvin Tomkins, Duchamp (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 89-90.

1. See Schwarz, 109-111; Lawrence D. Steefel, Jr. ” Marcel Duchamp’s Encore à cet Astre : A New Look,” Art Journal 36, no. 1 (1976): 23-30; Jerrold Seigel, The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp: Desire, Liberation, and the Self in Modern Culture (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 59-60. Schwarz suggested that Duchamp’s melancholy was afflicted by the marriage of his favorite sister Suzanne. His suggestion that Duchamp was in love with his sister is more funny than probable.


1. Cabanne, 29.

1. Cabanne, 36.


1. The addition of the adverb même in the title *La Mariee mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* has given rise to a lot of explanations: did Duchamp aim at the – homophonic – “m’aime”, did he want to refer to himself (through a double M [M M or (e)m(e)-(e)m(e)]? Or did he just like the alliterating effect of the “m” in the title, as an echo of Laforgue’s “bonhomm’”? In answering Otto

1. “the Hook (…) is made of a substance of oscillating density. This hook therefore has an indeterminate, variable and uncontrollable weight” and: “The chariot is emancipated horizontally. It is free, of all gravity in the horizontal plane.” *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 61 and 57.

1. One is reminded of the “jeu de massacre”, the fairground game Duchamp referred to in an interview with Richard Hamilton and George Heard Hamilton: “The idea came probably from the fairs, the country fairs in France at least, were you have a wedding scene. And you have big balls that you throw at the heads of the bride and the bridegroom and the guests (…).” Quoted from: *Marcel Duchamp: An Interview by Richard Hamilton in London and George Heard Hamilton in New York* (London: Audio Arts, 1975); also on: http://ubumexico.centro.org.mx/sound/duchamp/interviews/Duchamp-Marcel_George-Hamilton-Interview_1959.mp3
1. When questioned by Cabanne about his marriage (his first, in 1927) and the qualification of his “Large Glass” as a “negation of woman”, Duchamp stated: ‘It’s above all a negation of woman in the social sense of the word, that is to say, the woman-wife, the mother, the children, etc. I carefully avoided that, until I was sixty-seven. Then I married a woman who, because of her age, couldn’t have children. (…) One can have all the women one wants, one isn’t obliged to marry them.” See: Cabanne, 76

2. Grojnowski, Aux commencements du rire modern, 94

Opposition and Sister Squares: Marcel Duchamp and Samuel Beckett.

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Abstract

This article explores the personal and artistic relationship between Marcel Duchamp and Samuel Beckett. It examines the biographical evidence for a connection between the two men and
in particular focuses on chess. It explores some apparent evocations of Duchamp, both as a man and as an artist, in writings such as *Murphy* and *Eleuthéria*. It suggests that some key aspects of the dramatic structure, staging, and dialogue in *Endgame* derives from Beckett’s awareness of the peculiar endgame position described in *L’opposition et les cases conjuguées sont réconciliées* (Opposition and Sister Squares are Reconciled) by Duchamp and Halberstadt. To reach a detailed understanding of this argument, it sets out an expository account of a typical chess position and its accompanying terminologies from the book, then applies those to the play itself.

**Paris in the 1930s**

Samuel Beckett first encountered Marcel Duchamp in Paris during the 1930s. Something of the familiarity of their relationship may be deduced from this casual remark in a letter to George Reavey, written in 1938:

I am halfway through a modified version in French of *Love and Lethe*. I don’t know if it is better than the English version or merely as bad. I have 10 Poems in French also, mostly short, When I have a few more I shall send them to Éluard. Or get Duchamp to do it. (ed. Fehsenfeld and Overbeck, 2009, 645).

‘Love and Lethe’ was one of the stories in *More Pricks Than Kicks* (Beckett, 1934, 85-100) and the poems were later to be published as part of a set of twelve as ‘Poèmes 38-39’ (Beckett, 1946, 288-293). In 1932, Beckett had translated
several of Paul Éluard’s poems for This Quarter (Éluard, 1932, 86-98). By 1935 Reavey was in the process of preparing a new collection, entitled Thorns of Thunder, in which he intended to reprint these translations, with some more besides (ed. Fehsenfeld and Overbeck, 2009, 296-297). However, since these new translations were due at a time when Beckett was struggling to complete Murphy, he was obliged to refuse to take on Éluard’s ‘La Personnalité toujours neuve’ (A Personality Always New), declaring that he was ‘up to [his] eyes in other work’ (Ibid. 330). He lamented to Thomas MacGreevy in a letter dated 9 April [1936]: ‘Murphy wont move for me at all. I get held up over the absurdest difficulties of detail. But I sit before it most day of most days.’ (Ibid. 331).

Some relief from the pressures of writing Murphy came from playing chess. Marcel Duchamp seems to have been an occasional opponent during this period. Deirdre Bair cites Kay Boyle, Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, Josette Hayden, and an anonymous Irish writer and friend of Beckett, in recording that:

Beckett knew Duchamp throughout the 1930s in Paris, having met him at Mary Reynolds’ house. Beckett frequented the cafés where the best players congregated, as did Duchamp, and he followed the chess column that Duchamp occasionally wrote for the Paris daily newspaper Ce Soir (Bair, 1980, 393).

James Knowlson similarly recounts a conversation with Beckett in which he declared that he ‘played chess occasionally with Marcel Duchamp’ (Knowlson, 1996, 289). Although this statement
is placed within a chapter covering the period 1937-39, there is little doubt that the acquaintance between the two artists preceded those dates. Mary Reynolds, who had begun her long-term relationship with Duchamp in 1926 (a love affair that only came to an end with her death, with Duchamp at her side, in 1950), welcomed both of them into her house in Montparnasse:

The 1930s marked a period of tranquillity, contentment, and artistic achievement for [Mary] Reynolds. Her relationship with Duchamp had settled into a comfortable intimacy. Her creativity and binding production were at their highest levels. She held an open house almost nightly at her home at 14, rue Hallé, with her quiet garden the favored spot after dinner for the likes of Duchamp, Brancusi, Man Ray, Breton, Barnes, Guggenheim, Éluard, Mina Loy, James Joyce, Jean Cocteau, Samuel Beckett, and others. (Godlewski, 2001, 12).

It is therefore no surprise to find Beckett writing with complete confidence in 1938 that Duchamp would pass the poems to Éluard, who in turn would be willing to assist in getting them published.

_Murphy_

Duchamp steered a studiously idiosyncratic course through Parisian intellectual life, continuing the line of Dada yet somewhat distant from it, actively involved in Surrealism yet managing to avoid becoming too close to Breton’s group. Nevertheless, in 1938 he designed the Second Surrealist Exhibition at the Galérie des Beaux-Arts. Beckett, similarly, ‘shared in the thrilling atmosphere of experiment and innovation that surrounded Surrealism’ but kept his distance
'largely because, ... they were distinctly cool, if not actively hostile, to Joyce’s own ‘revolution of the word’ (Knowlson, 1996, 107).

Murphy reflects this sense of detached engagement. The celebrated chess game in which Mr Endon methodically moves his pieces out, then moves them back to their starting positions, irrespective of Murphy’s own moves, is both dadaistically absurd and surreal, while at the same time fitting neither of those descriptors exactly. The detached and remorseless logic of Mr Endon himself, whose chess-playing is described as his ‘one frivolity’, also seems somewhat Duchampian in character:

Endon was a schizophrenic of the most amiable variety, at least for the purposes of such a humble and envious outsider as Murphy. The langour in which he passed his days while deepening now and then to the extent of some charming suspension of gesture, was never so profound as to inhibit all movement. His inner voice did not harangue him, it was unobtrusive and melodious, a gentle continuo in the whole consort of his hallucinations. The bizarrerie of his attitudes never exceeded a stress laid on their grace.

There are other seeming echoes elsewhere, for example, Neary’s avowal ‘To gain the affections of Miss Dwyer even for on short hour, would benefit me no end’, which is similar in both content and cadence to the title of Duchamp’s small glass of 1918: To be looked at (from the other side of the glass) with one eye, close to, for almost an hour. Katherine S. Dreier, who was often referred to as “Miss Dreier”, owned the small glass at this time.

Chapter Six, which is devoted to the split between Murphy’s mind and his body, reminds one of Duchamp’s finding a way out of ‘retinal’ painting and into conceptual art and thence to chess. Duchamp famously sought to put art at the service of
the mind and eschewed the physicality of ‘retinal’ painting, by adopting a ‘neutral’ style, by eliminating backgrounds from his work, by removing evidence of the artist’s hand, and finally by giving up the making of art altogether. His celebrated pursuit of the beauty of aesthetic indifference, expressed most strongly in the readymades, was also a quest for freedom: from taste, from the art world, from choice. He consciously worked within the concept of liberty that this afforded him, describing himself as a Cartesian whose ideal was the logic of chess:

> Chess is a marvelous piece of Cartesianism, and so imaginative that it doesn’t even look Cartesian at first. The beautiful combinations that chess players invent – you don’t see them coming, but afterward there is no mystery – it’s a pure logical conclusion (Tomkins 1998, 211).

Beckett also made a link between indifference and freedom in *Murphy*:

> The freedom of indifference, the indifference of freedom, the will dust in the dust of its object the act a handful of sand let fall – these were some of the shapes he had sighted, sunset landfall after many days. While the indifference described here is not exactly the same as Duchamp’s aesthetic indifference, the sense of freedom that indifference brings, a resignation of the will in favour of an apparently insignificant move, leads us once again to their shared enjoyment of chess. Here the chess is metaphorical rather than literal Cartesianism, and tinged with Beckettian
sadness and a sense of futility. The game culminates in Murphy’s resignation, both in the chess sense and in a ‘transcendental sense of disappointment’, as he realises that he is incapable of achieving Mr Endon’s hermetic detachment. The image of a head amidst scattered chessmen conjures up Duchamp’s various studies for his painting, *Portrait of Chess Players*:

Following Mr Endon’s forty-third move Murphy gazed for a long time at the board before laying his Shah on his side, and again for a long time after that act of submission. But little by little his eyes were captured by the brilliant swallowtail of Mr Endon’s arms and legs, purple, scarlet, black and glitter, till they saw nothing else, and that in a short time only as a vivid blur, Neary’s big blooming buzzing confusion or ground, mercifully free of figure. Wearying soon of this he dropped his head on his arms in the midst of the chessmen, which scattered with a terrible noise. Mr Endon’s finery persisted for a little in an after-image scarcely inferior to the original. Then this also faded and Murphy began to see nothing, that colourlessness which is such a rare postnatal treat, being the absence (to abuse a nice distinction) not of percipere but of percipi.

The final sentence is a reference to the famous maxim usually attributed to Bishop Berkeley: *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived). This is itself an immaterialist reversal of the
Cartesian cogito. The absence of self-perception which Murphy achieves is an ironic ‘abuse’ of the stinction between the two. When he awakes from his trance, Murphy finds that Mr Endon has wandered off and is pressing light-switches in the corridors of the lunatic asylum in a way that seems haphazard but is in fact determined by an a mental pattern as precise as any of those that governed his chess.

All this leads to Murphy’s death. Soon after he has become a warden at the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, he procures, with the help of the poet, Ticklepenny, the garret of his dreams. It is an attic with a single skylight that is isolated from the rest of the house. Its only drawback is that it lacks heating. While Murphy is out, Ticklepenny rigs up a contraption whose Duchampian characteristics are uncanny, consisting of a radiator that must be connected to the gas by glass tubing that flows from a WC on the floor below.

He described how he had turned it on in the WC and raced back to the garret. He explained how the flow could only be regulated from the WC, as there was no tap at the radiator’s seat of entry.

The linking of water and gas occurs throughout Duchamp’s work, most notably in La Mariée mise à nu par ses Célibataires, même (The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, even) (1915-23), better known as the Large Glass. The Green Box of 1934, which contains all the notes that accompany the Large Glass, states: ‘Given 1. the waterfall 2. the illuminating gas’ (Sanouillet and Peterson, 1975, 27). The precise derivation of this is made clear with the ‘imitated readymade’ of 1958: a facsimile of plaques attached to certain Parisian apartment blocks, with
which Beckett would have been very familiar, which read: ‘Eau et Gaz à tous les étages’ (Water and Gas on every floor). The connection between the two is continued thematically and representationally in Duchamp’s posthumous installation *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d’eau / 2° le gaz d’éclairage* (Given: 1 The Waterfall, 2 The Illuminating Gas) (1946-1966).

Thus the WC resembles the Bachelor Machine, powered by a waterfall, regulated by a ballcock (in the Glass it is a bottle of Benedictine) which rises and falls by means of a hook arrangement (just as the jet is turned on by a double chain and ring). The connecting tubes function like the capillary tubes of the lower domain of the Glass. The radiator, with its apparent defiance of ignition, suggests the cool Bride whose desire magneto (coils) has to be excited before she becomes aroused/hot. The skylight evokes the Moving Inscription, allowing Murphy to look out at the stars (i.e. the Milky Way). The Illuminating Gas, powered by the Waterfall, animates the whole and brings warmth to the garret.

And what of Murphy and his imminent doom? We are already aware of his status as confirmed bachelor. We are also aware of the intensity of his longing to achieve the Endon state. Murphy resembles one of the nine ‘shots’ drilled through the *Large Glass*: a foreign body in the purity of the Bride, a hole in a pane of glass, a nothingness within a nothing. As he returns to the quarters of the male nurses (who, of necessity, all live below the garret) he strips bare. He leaves behind his uniform (in Duchampian parlance, his ‘malic mould’) and becomes undiluted, uncontained Gas. This loss of form and identity is shown by his inability to conjure up any images. He has become as transparent as the Glass which surrounds him. Seated in his rocking-chair (whose motion apparently resembles that of the Glider) he perceives the radiator (the Bride) before penetrating the Glass, shot through to ‘...the freedom of that light and dark that did not clash, nor fade nor lighten
except to their communion.'

The consequent fireball seems to be more orgasm than apotheosis, more petit mort than Big Bang. Murphy confirms the volatile nature of the gas of which he becomes a part in his Duchamp-like proposition that ‘Chaos’ is the etymological origin of the word ‘Gas’. Now, ironically, the WC is ‘lit by electricity’, just like the Large Glass depicted in the drawing Cols Alités of 1959. The causalité that leads from Endon to the shattered skylight is the same that leads from opening move to checkmate.

Of course, none of these parallels is supported by any corroborating evidence, either in Beckett’s correspondence, or Duchamp’s writings, or in the critical literature. Yet, it does seem curious that, at a moment when chess dominates the novel, such Duchampian resonances should appear. Perhaps it is merely a matter of a certain zeitgeist which Duchamp and Beckett both succeeded in capturing, or perhaps it goes deeper than that. What is beyond doubt, however, is that the two men were about to begin a brief but meaningful association in which chess was the driving force.

**Arcachon, 1940**

In June 1940, the Nazis occupied Paris. Duchamp had already decided, following the fall of the Netherlands in May, to flee to the small seaside town of Arcachon on the Bay of Biscay, southwest of Bordeaux. Beckett and his partner Suzanne Descehevaux-Dumesnil (of whom he was ‘dispassionately’ fond) also fled Paris, first to Vichy and eventually joining Duchamp in Arcachon.

Accounts vary somewhat as to the extent of the presence of Mary Reynolds in Arcachon during this period. According to James Knowlson, it was ‘thanks to her kindness and generosity’ that the couple were able to find a room and, with the help of
a loan from Valéry Larbaud, then to rent a house overlooking the sea: the Villa Saint-Georges, 135 bis Boulevard de la Plage (Knowlson, 1996, 300). Susan Glover Godlewski, on the other hand, reveals that despite the best persuasive efforts of Marcel Duchamp, Reynolds stubbornly refused to leave Paris, reluctantly spending no more than perhaps a month’s vacation in Arcachon (Godlewski, 2001, 15). She certainly stayed in Paris throughout the war and was an active member of the Résistance. In a letter to her brother, dated August 7th 1941, she said that she spent much time ‘tracking down food and [giving] unorganized aid’ (Ibid. 15). This ‘aid’ was resistance work, for which she was later narrowly to avoid execution.

Whatever the truth, at some point the two couples were joined by a third, the painter Jean Crotti and his second wife, Duchamp’s sister, Suzanne. The main pastime of the three men was playing chess. Beckett was ‘delighted to find that, in one move, he had acquired two new chess partners.’ (Knowlson, 1996, 301). They played regularly in a seafront café. Crotti and Beckett seem to have been fairly well matched, but Duchamp, who was a leading chess master, was, according to Beckett, ‘always too good for him. Yet he said this with the quiet satisfaction of knowing that he had played against someone of that calibre.’ (Haynes and Knowlson, 2003, 13). Both men shared an enormous admiration for the great players, as this incident in Arcachon demonstrates:

Once when Duchamp and Beckett were playing chess together, Duchamp pointed out, to Beckett’s great excitement, that the world chess champion, Alexander Alekhine (a chess genius, according to Beckett) had just walked in. (Knowlson, 1996, 301).

It is not hard to imagine that both would have agreed with
Duchamp’s assertion to the New York State Chess Association banquet in 1952 that ‘the chess pieces are the block alphabet which shapes thoughts; and these thoughts, although making a visual design on the chess-board, express their beauty abstractly, like a poem … I have come to the personal conclusion while all artists are not chess players, all chess players are artists’.

**Portrait of Chess Players**

So what did they talk about, these two masters of the art of silence? Unfortunately no record of their conversations exists, but we may assume that it was mostly fairly casual and probably focused on the game in hand, or perhaps current affairs, or maybe life in Paris. Chess players tend not to talk during a game, although in a non-professional setting such as this that rule may be somewhat relaxed. Perhaps Duchamp, as an advanced player, gave Beckett a little tuition, if only in the form of post-game analysis. Beckett was always keen to learn more about chess and Duchamp had already published (in 1932) his book on endgames *L’opposition et les cases conjuguées sont reconciliées* (Opposition and Sister Squares are reconciled), co-authored with Vitaly Halberstadt. They would certainly have enjoyed remaining quiet, but it is also rather inconceivable that they would not have discussed at least some aspects of their artistic work. Perhaps they talked about the extent to which chess was such an important force for them both.

For Duchamp, it was ‘the imagining of the movement or the gesture that makes the beauty, in [chess]. It’s completely in
one’s gray matter.’ (Cabanne, 1971, 18-19). It is often stated that he gave up art for chess on his return to Paris in 1923, and it is certainly true that playing chess dominated his existence from that time (despite the secret work on the posthumously revealed installation Etant Donnés). However, it is also clear that, for Duchamp, there was little distinction between art and chess. It was ‘a logical, or if you prefer, a Cartesian constant’ that was highly important to someone who famously wished to put painting ‘at the service of the mind’ (Sanouillet and Peterson, 1975, 125).

Duchamp began playing chess as a child and its presence in family life was depicted in the 1910 painting La Partie d’échecs (The Chess Game), which shows his two older brothers at the board while their wives take tea. Jacques Villon and Raymond Duchamp-Villon were the subjects once again of the Portrait de joueurs d’échecs (Portrait of Chess Players) of 1911, but Duchamp’s style had already moved on from the earlier influence of Cézanne to a reinterpretation of Cubism that was to culminate later the same year in the Nu Descendant un escalier (Nude Descending a Staircase). Duchamp commented:

I painted the heads of my two brothers playing chess, not in a garden this time, but in indefinite space … This particular canvas was painted by gaslight to obtain the subdued effect, when you look at it again by daylight.’ (d’Harnoncourt and McShine, 1973, 254).

This ‘subdued effect’ reflects Duchamp’s growing concern with removing the superfluous elements from his work. In successive pieces, the background was eliminated, becoming flat black in the Broyeuse de Chocolat (Chocolate Grinder) of 1913 and transparent by the time of the Large Glass. As it moved towards the condition of the chessboard, Duchamp’s art lost
anything that might be considered immaterial to the ‘game’
that was being played. (Etant Donnés finally reinstated the
background, but ironically, and on a chessboard floor). Thus
it acquired a certain rigour that entirely befitted his desire
to achieve an aesthetic indifference that is closer to
mathematics than the decorative arts.
The readymades, ‘found’ objects that most epitomised this
indifference, also contained allusions to chess, most notably
in Trébuchet (Trap)(1917), which consists of a coat rack
nailed to the floor, its four hooks uppermost. The title is a
reference to this equally spiky, yet salutary, chess position
(Figure 1):

```
1. ... f4-e3
2. b5-c5 e3-e4.
```
It would be wrong to play

1. ... f4-e4

because of

2. b5-c5!

and White wins the pawn.

During his period in Argentina in 1918-19, Duchamp designed his own chess pieces and a set of rubber stamps that could be used for playing postal chess. It was also during this sojourn, socially isolated as he was in Buenos Aires, that he became so obsessed with the game that he decided to turn professional. In 1920 he joined the Marshall Chess Club in New York, and by 1923 he was participating in his first major tournament, in Brussels. In 1925, he designed the poster for the French Chess Championship in Nice. In 1931, following a tournament in Prague, he became a member of the committee of French Chess Federation and its delegate (until 1937) to the International Chess Federation. In 1932, in what was probably the best performance of his chess career, he won the Paris Chess Tournament.

In the same year, he saw Raymond Roussel playing chess at a nearby table in the Café de la Régence, but he did not have the courage to introduce himself. The influence of Roussel on the Large Glass has been well documented (Henderson 1998) and the presence of his poetic method (derived from plays on words) may be detected throughout Duchamp’s oeuvre, including the readymades and the alter ego Rrose Sélavy. Along with Alfred Jarry and Jean-Pierre Brisset, Roussel provided much of the literary underpinnings of Duchamp’s art. The fact that Roussel was also a leading chess player, who had published a
celebrated solution to the difficult mate with a Bishop and a Knight alone, explains Duchamp’s nervousness at the encounter.

Duchamp took part in his last major international chess tournament in 1933, in Folkestone, England, but continued to play correspondence chess, serving as captain of the French team, in which role he remained undefeated.

Beckett shared Duchamp’s passion for chess, if not his playing ability. He (Beckett) was inspired by his uncle Howard, who had the rare distinction of having beaten Capablanca (later to become world champion) during an exhibition match in Dublin before the First World War (Knowlson, 1996, 9). Beckett also greatly admired Capablanca, whose extremely lucid playing style and influential books emphasized the importance of the endgame as the essence of chess. Beckett played enthusiastically during his schooldays and at university and, as we have seen, throughout his life, never losing an opportunity for a game. He had an extensive library of chess books, and explicitly based certain aspects of his writings on the game, most notably, of course, in Murphy and Endgame, although allusions to it appear as early as 1929 in the short story ‘Assumption’.

**Opposition and Sister Squares are reconciled**

*L’opposition et les cases conjuguées sont reconciliées* was published in Paris and Brussels (Editions de l’Echiquier, 1932) in a limited edition. Few copies were sold, and Francis M. Naumann records that, late into his life, Duchamp “kept most of the edition in a closet, giving copies away to friends whenever he thought the gift appropriate” (Naumann and Bailey 2009, 22). The book’s design and its use of chess terminologies are both somewhat unusual for a chess textbook, and clearly resonate with themes in Duchamp’s artwork. So, for example, the illustrations frequently divide the chessboard across the middle using a dotted line as a ‘hinge’, self-consciously echoing the division of the *Large*
Glass into two panels. To compound the allusion, eight of these ‘hinged pictures’, as Duchamp called the Large Glass (Sanouillet and Peterson, 1975, 27), are printed on transparent paper so that they may be folded to make the two principal domains correspond exactly. Here we see one variation of the instruction that was eventually to be included in the Green Box of 1934: ‘develop the principle of the hinge’.

The chess argument depends on two well-known properties that become highly important in the endgame, but Duchamp’s choice of terminologies may have had a wider significance than just their chess usage. His preference for the term ‘sister’ squares (in English) over the more commonly used ‘corresponding’ squares may be a nod towards Suzanne. The term ‘opposition’, while it does not figure much as a word in Duchamp’s notes, nevertheless occurs throughout his work as a theme, as is best exemplified by the relationship between Bride and Bachelors, in the two panels of the Glass, which are then ‘reconciled’ by the operations of that imaginary technology. The word ‘domain’ occurs particularly in the Green Box with reference to the two panels of the Glass. The ‘passage’ of the White King from secondary to principal domain echoes the passage of the Virgin to the Bride (as depicted in the canvas of that title of 1912). The principle of the opposition in chess is as follows:
In Figure 2, with White to play, Black ‘has the opposition’ in both cases. a6 – a8 is direct opposition, whereas g2- g8 is distant. This is due to the rule which prevents Kings from occupying adjoining squares. The King which has the move is obliged to give ground.
Likewise, in Fig. 3, the two Kings are in ‘virtual opposition’, because they occupy two diagonally opposed squares of the same colour which are at the corners of a rectangle.

To reach a full understanding of how all this might have influenced *Endgame* requires a knowledge of Duchamp and Halberstadt’s book. What follows is an illustrative account of one of the positions used by the authors to illustrate their thesis. The position was composed by Emmanuel Lasker and Gustavus Charles Reichelm, and first published in the Chicago Tribune in 1901, and is still occasionally used today.
In Figure 4 it is immediately clear that the pawns are unable to move. It also becomes evident that the White King can penetrate the Black position via two (and only two) squares: b5 and g5. Should he succeed in occupying either of these two squares (with or without the move) the White King will capture a black pawn (a5 or f5), thereby enabling him to promote his own pawn to a Queen on the eighth rank to win the game. The two squares b5 and g5 are called the ‘pole’ squares (X and O, respectively).

To prevent White’s King from occupying g5, Black’s King must arrive at g6 on the move after White’s reaches h4, forcing him to retreat. White, therefore, must reach h4 whilst Black is still at e8 or e7 (i.e. he is two files ahead of Black). Likewise, to prevent White from occupying b5, Black must occupy a6 or b6 on the move after White’s to c4. However, if Black chooses a6, White will be two files ahead in a race to the other pole and so Black can only prevent penetration on b6.
Figure 5 shows that there is not a single minimum route between the two threats for either King. One square of White’s minimum route has a unique correspondent on Black’s minimum route, namely d3 (to c7). Thus, if White moves c4-d3, Black replies ...b6-c7, and will arrive at g6 in time to prevent White from occupying O (g5). The related squares d3 and c7 are the ‘sister squares’. The pairings b6 and c4, and g6 and h4 are also sister squares.
Once these sister squares have been observed, corresponding blocks may be built up: the ‘principal domains’. In Figure 6, the squares C only touch on A and B. Likewise D to A and C, and so on. The two rectangles formed by the squares B thru G are the principal domains of the White and Black Kings. The squares A are the decisive positions of the Kings at pole X, and are therefore not strictly part of the principal domains.

The two domains have the property of ‘superposition by folding’ along the hinge a5-h5. For the coincidence to be perfect, one must move the Black domain one square to the right. This fact enables us to establish a law of heterodox opposition for this position: a7 and b3 (squares D) are in heterodox opposition because the two squares are equidistant from the hinge and on right hand neighbour files. Thus the general formula for heterodox opposition in the principal domains is as follows: without the move, the White King has the heterodox opposition when he occupies, on a right hand
adjacent file to the file occupied by the Black King, a square of opposite colour to that occupied by the latter.

Let us suppose that the White King occupies b2 (i.e. square F in his principal domain) and he has the heterodox opposition to Black (who has the move) positioned on his own F (a8). The authors examine three possible replies for Black: 1) 1. ... a8-a7; 2) 1. ...a8-b7; 3) 1. ...a8-b8. Of these, the second rapidly transmutes into the first.

1st Variation, after 1. ...a8-a7

b2-b3 (White retains the heterodox opposition and the threat of reaching A in one move)

2. ...a7-b7 (forced to remain one square from A)

3. b3-c3 (still has heterodox opposition and threat on A)

3. ...b7-c7 (forced. If he plays b7-a7, White will have the two file advantage to 0)

4. c3-d3 (still has heterodox opposition and threat on A)

4. ... any (Black is now forced to abandon his control of A, as any move to the left will give White a two file advantage to 0. White now occupies A and wins).

2nd Variation

Becomes 1st Variation, e.g.

1. ...a8-b7

2. b2-c3 etc.

3rd Variation, after 1. ...a8-b8
2. b2-c2 (takes the heterodox opposition)

2. …b8-c8 (to keep White King as far as possible from A)

3. c2-d2 (retains the heterodox opposition)

3. …c8-d8 (Black cannot turn back because White will gain the two file advance. The first variation showed that …c8-c7 would be a win for White)

4. d2-c3 (White breaks the opposition, threatening to reach A in one move)

4 …d8-c7 (forced to protect A)

5. c3-d3 (reverting to the first variation, and White wins).

It is clear, therefore, that White must enter his principal domain on a square which gives him the heterodox opposition, or which does not permit Black to take it.
In Figure 7 the dashed letters indicate the extent of the White King’s secondary domain. As we have seen, he must pass from this domain into his principal domain either by taking the heterodox opposition, or by moving onto a square which does not allow Black to take it. Thus, in Figure 7, White cannot play to b2 (F) on the first move, because Black would take the heterodox opposition by moving to a8 (F). Therefore, the best White can do is 1. al-bl (C’-D’), thereby taking the secondary heterodox opposition (on file adjacent to the right and square of opposite colour).

If Black replies 1. ... a7-b7 (avoiding F and E which would allow White to enter his principal domain with the heterodox opposition, at the corresponding sister square), then White must play 2. bl-cl (D’-C’), retaining the secondary heterodox opposition.

Now Black must avoid squares F, E, G, which would allow White to enter his principal domain as before, so he plays 2. ... b7-c7 (C-B).

White, as before, can only retain the secondary heterodox opposition, and must play 3. cl-dl (C’-B’).

Black cannot now play to C, E or A, because White will have the two file advantage to pole 0. If he goes to c8 (G), White will enter his principal domain at d2, with the heterodox opposition, and win as we have seen. Black must play to the d file (the solution is the same for 3. ...c7-d7 as 3. ... c7-d8).

Now the White King can breach the opposition, by entering his principal domain at c2 (E), thereby preventing Black from taking the heterodox opposition at his sister E, and simultaneously threatening to reach c4 (A) in two moves.
Black must remain on the d file, since a move to G or B would enable White to take the heterodox opposition in the principal domain.

White replies 5. c2-c3 (E-C), remaining in breach of the opposition and threatening to reach A in one move.

Because of this, Black is forced to play 5. … (d)-c7 (C-B).

We have already seen how White will win once he has taken the heterodox opposition in the principal domain (e.g. 6. c3-d3).

The authors conclude their investigation into this position by giving a drawing variation, in order to show how ignorant play by White can ruin his chances of a win. In such a variation, Black is satisfied to take and hold the heterodox opposition, preventing penetration of his position.

Returning to the position of Figure 7 (the original position), let us assume that White foolishly plays 1. al-b2 (C’-F).

As Black has the move, he takes the heterodox opposition in the principal domain by playing 1. …a7-a8 (D-F). If the White King moves about in the principal domain, Black will follow him, always keeping the principal heterodox opposition, and will accompany him, one file behind, if he attempts to reach pole O. That is a draw. If White returns to al (C’), Black can take the secondary heterodox opposition in reverse at b7 (C).

From this, it is clear that White must leave the a-file on his first move (in the original position) and never return to it. An opening move of 1. al-a2 would lead to a draw, since Black would take the secondary heterodox opposition in reverse with the reply 1. …a7-b8 (D-E), leading to a drawn game.

In conclusion, it will be observed that the most Black can hope for is a draw. Given accurate play by White, Black can only succeed in delaying the progress of events.

Eleuthéria
The first appearance of chess in Beckett’s theatrical works occurs in the suppressed play *Eleuthéria* (1947). Towards the end of Act III, an ‘audience member’ delivers the following speech to the Glazier:

... if I’m still here it’s that there is something in this business that literally paralyzes me and leaves me completely dumbfounded. How do you explain that? You play chess? No. It doesn’t matter. It’s like when you watch a chess game between players of the lowest class. For three quarters of an hour they haven’t touched a single piece. They sit there gaping at the board like two horses’ asses and you’re also there, even more of a horse’s ass than they are, nailed to the spot, disgusted, bored, worn-out, filled with wonder at so much stupidity. Up until the moment when you can’t take it any more. Then you tell them, So do that, do that, what are you waiting for, do that and it’s all over, we can go to bed. It’s inexcusable, it goes against even the most elementary know-how, you haven’t even met the guys, but it’s stronger than you, it’s either that or a fit. There you have pretty much what’s happening to me. *Mutatis mutandis*, of course. You get me? (Beckett, 1995, 143-44).

It is this sense of frustration and despair, deriving from the inevitable decline of a chess game first identified in *Murphy*, but exaggerated at the hands of the
idiot players (amongst whom, one suspects, Beckett might have numbered himself) who represent us all as we fail to grasp the hopelessness of our situation, that is a theme in much of Beckett’s work. The Cartesian mechanisms of chess always demand that choices are made; choices that gradually run out until, in the end, win or lose, there remain no more. Duchamp declared: ‘in art I came finally to the point where I wished to make no further decisions, decisions of an artistic order, so to speak’ (Judovitz, 2010, 109). Beckett applied the same principle to life itself.

It is interesting to note that the chess-playing protagonist of Eleuthéria is called ‘Victor’, which was the nickname given to Duchamp by Henri-Pierre Roché (the author of Jules et Jim), a close personal friend since before World War I. Roché’s unfinished novel of 1957, entitled Victor (Duchamp), is a character study. Caroline Cros observes:

The main character, Victor (Duchamp), is almost entirely absent throughout the book, yet Patricia (Beatrice [Webb]) and Pierre (Henri-Pierre [Roché]) are both utterly fascinated by him – ‘There is no danger since we both love him’ – and speak of him incessantly (Cros, 2006, 45).

This is essentially the scenario of Eleuthéria, in which Victor is more often absent than present, yet is the main topic of conversation amongst the other characters. He constantly evades giving an account of himself, yet exerts a powerful influence, effectively ‘playing’ the other characters like chess pieces. Challenged by the Glazier, he says:
VICTOR: I look out for my welfare, when I can.

GLAZIER: Your welfare! What welfare?

VICTOR: My freedom.

GLAZIER: Your freedom! It is beautiful, your freedom. Freedom to do what?

VICTOR: To do nothing.

It was Roché who wrote the following summary of Duchamp and Halberstadt’s book:

There comes a time toward the end of the game when there is almost nothing left on the board, and when the outcome depends on the fact that the King can or cannot occupy a certain square opposite to, and as a given distance from, the opposing king. Only sometimes the King has a choice between two moves and may act in such a way as to suggest he has completely lost interest in winning the game. Then the other King, if he too is a true sovereign, can give the appearance of being even less interested, and so on. Thus the two monarchs can waltz carelessly one by one across the board as though they weren’t at all engaged in mortal combat. However, there are rules governing each step they take and the slightest mistake is instantly fatal. One must provoke the other to commit that blunder and keep his own head at all times. These are the rules that Duchamp brought to light (the free and forbidden squares) to amplify this haughty junket of the Kings (Lebel, 1959, 83).
Endgame

Ruby Cohn recounted Beckett’s own description of the scenario of *Endgame*, which seems to echo Roché’s text: Hamm is a king in this chess game lost from the start. From the start he knows he is making loud senseless moves. That he will make no progress at all with the gaff. Now at the last he makes a few senseless moves as only a bad player would. A good one would have given up long ago. He is only trying to delay the inevitable end. Each of his gestures is one of the last useless moves which put off the end. He’s a bad player (Cohn, 1974, 152).

Deirdre Bair cites an unnamed Irish writer and friend of Beckett who ‘feels that any interpretation of *Fin de partie* must begin with the influence of Marcel Duchamp’ (Bair, 1978, 393). The contention in the present article is that this influence goes deeper than just the basic predicament described by Roché and Cohn, and is the result of Beckett’s awareness of Duchamp and Halberstadt’s book, or at least of the endgame position it contains. While Dirk Van Hulle has confirmed that the book is not among those in Beckett’s extant library, “that does not necessarily imply that he didn’t read Duchamp’s book, because Beckett gave away many of his books to friends” (private email to the author, 5.7.13). Since Duchamp himself gave away copies of *L’opposition*... it is possible that Beckett received one and passed it on. Or it is equally
possible that, given their circumstances in Paris and Arcachon, the book was never actually given to Beckett, but Duchamp explained its contents to him.

Either way, its unique characteristics may be detected in the structuring of the drama, in the staging, and in some key points of dialogue. The endgame position itself is, as Duchamp himself pointed out, ‘so rare as to be nearly Utopian’ (Cabanne, 1971, 78). It almost has the status of a philosophical proposition of great theoretical purity. It is full of ironies, indeed of potential horrors. This is not just any endgame: it is the endgame to end all endgames.

The frustrations of the position described above finds expression in the way in which Black (Hamm) haphazardly delays and thwarts White (Clov). Identification of these two characters with their respective chess colours is made easy by the symbolic attributes of both: Hamm is blind, hence unaware; in a wheelchair, hence restricted; wearing dark glasses, hence ‘black’; Clov is knowing, mobile, and very frustrated.

Both the structure and content of the play echo this delayed peculiarity. Beckett’s response is poetic yet formal: the state of a player at the end of a long game. Hamm and Clov themselves represent both players and pieces (the Kings) and the whole play takes place at the next-to-end of the dramatic structure, which so strongly resembles the phases of a game of chess.

Hamm is desperate for the end of the game, yet unable to comprehend the geometry of the position: ‘Enough, it’s time it ended, in the refuge too. (Pause) And yet I hesitate, I hesitate to... to end.’

His opening *cric de coeur* resembles Duchamp’s note in the *Green Box*: ‘given that... ; if I suppose I’m suffering a lot...’:

> Can there be misery (*he yawns*) loftier than mine? No
doubt. Formerly. But now? (Pause) My father? (Pause) My mother? (Pause) My ... dog? (Pause) Oh I am willing to believe they suffer as much as such creatures can suffer. But does that mean their sufferings equal mine? No doubt.

Duchamp’s quasi-mathematical (“given that...”) statement of supposed suffering is matched by the detached, even bored (“he yawns”), self-observation of Hamm, whose similarly quasi-mathematical qualities are revealed most clearly in the French: “Mais est-ce dire que nos souffrances se valent? Sans doute.”

The play is set in a location by the sea, one where the outside world has crumbled away to nothingness. This setting is reminiscent of Arcachon and Europe under the Nazis. The opening description of the stage set and Clov’s actions establish the Duchamp/Halberstadt position. Grey light is reflected from the surface of a chessboard. The two windows represent the two poles of the position. This is confirmed later in the play when Clov looks through both windows and describes the scene for Hamm’s benefit: ‘Light black. From pole to pole.’ (‘Light black’ also describes the alternation of white and black squares).

The two ashbins, homes of Nagg and Nell, symbolize the immobile and redundant pawns. A picture with its face turned to the wall seems perhaps to echo Duchamp’s abandonment of painting for chess. When Clov removes the picture and replaces it with an alarm clock, the echo rings louder, since, from the audience’s point of view, the clock is seen from the side, a disposition which has a source in the Green Box:

The Clock in profile
and the Inspector of Space

Note: When a clock is seen from the side it no longer tells the time.

Beckett extends this examination of a clock’s properties by having his characters listen to its alarm, as if it were a piece of music:

(Enter Clov with alarrn-clock. He holds it against Hamm’s ear And releases alarm.They listen to it ringing to the end. Pause.)

CLOV: Fit to wake the dead! Did you hear it?

Hamm: Vaguely.

CLOV: The end is terrific!

Hamm: I prefer the middle.

Notice that Hamm’s ineptitude extends even to the simplest act of listening, whereas Clov is well able to appreciate the change from activity to inactivity. Hamm prefers the cover and confusion of ceaseless activity, just as he would have preferred the multiplicity of choices in the middle-game which has ended.

Clov’s opening movements and actions serve not only to map out the position, but also tell us that he understands it, since it is he who opens the curtains on the windows and looks through them. It is as though we are seeing enacted the thought-processes of the White player, as he analyses the position using Duchampian geometry. His opening speech makes
clear the facts of his position, i.e. that he is waiting for Hamm/Black to move to a suitable square, enabling him (Clov) to enter his principal domain either with or in breach of the opposition.

I’ll go now to my kitchen, ten feet by ten feet – by ten feet, and wait for him to whistle me. (Pause) Nice dimensions, nice proportions, I’ll lean on the table, and look at the wall, and wait for him to whistle me.

The kitchen, therefore, is White’s secondary domain, as the squareness of its outline suggests, and Clov is watching the wall not through boredom, but in anticipation of the moment when he will be able to penetrate it (i.e. into his principal domain) and win. The whistle is Hamm’s signal that he has ‘moved’, and occurs at several points throughout the play. We must imagine a scenario of White constantly retaining the heterodox opposition, in response to the haphazard but successful delaying moves of Black. As we have seen in the third of the winning variations of the Lasker-Reichelm position, a point must come when White is able to enter his principal domain in breach of opposition. It is at the penultimate whistle that this finally occurs and Clov is suddenly free to move – to ‘go’ – and to win. Hamm’s opening speech confirms this, and establishes him as a bad player who should have given up a long time ago. The act of wiping his glasses, pointless as it is for a blind man, suggests the
absurdity of his optimism.
The ensuing dialogue begins the cataloguing of the extraordinary relationship between the two characters, which finds its parallel in the minds of two chess-players. Each is dependent upon the other for his very existence, and some degree of union is achieved (via the chessboard), yet simultaneously they are engaged upon a struggle of mutual destruction. In this particular instance, the blind Hamm is aware of impending doom, but plays entirely by his feelings, whereas Clov, unable, due to his suppressed exasperation, to pity Hamm (suppressed by necessity since this is, after all, a game of chess), plays logically (‘I love order. It’s my dream’), hampered, indeed crippled, by Hamm’s lack of understanding. If Hamm understood, he would perceive that Clov also understood, and would resign forthwith. The relationship is summed up by the idée fixe:

HAMM: (anguished). What’s happening, what’s happening?

CLOV: Something is taking its course.

Clov, of course, cannot afford to reveal his knowledge to Hamm, even if such a thing were possible.

A further curious exchange acquires significance in the light of Duchamp:

HAMM: Why don’t you kill me?

CLOV: I don’t know the combination to the larder.

The larder would be set into the wall of the kitchen. If Clov could gain access to it, there might be a quick way through the wall (i.e. from his secondary to his principal domain), but, of course, it is Black/Hamm who is
preventing this solution (and thereby his own rapid death). He seems to sense this fact later, when ingenuously he promises to give Clov the combination (itself a chess term), a promise which, as Clov well knows, he cannot fulfil except by accident.

This exchange is followed by references to bicycle wheels which yet again call Duchamp to mind, and reminiscences of the recent middle-game, with its knights and pawns, of whom Nagg and Nell (who ‘crashed on our tandem and lost our shanks’) are two. During his conversation with them, Hamm reveals the depth of his feelings, confirming that he has ‘a heart in his head’ (a serious handicap for a chess player) and almost succeeds in eliciting our pity. He spoils everything with his cry: ‘My kingdom for a nightman.’

‘Nightman’ is a portmanteau-word containing the notion of a knight (i.e. a horse), black in colour (night) which will end the game in Black’s favour. As Hamm follows this futile wish with a desperate move, our suspicions of his inadequacies are confirmed. So desperate is he, in fact, that he takes comfort simply from the change of square (accomplished in the realm of the imagination, with the stage invisibly becoming the new square), and has Clov push him around its boundaries and back to the centre, straightening up fussily as a distracted chess-player (while saying ‘j’adoube’) might do with his King.

Clov quickly realises that the new move has not presented the winning opportunity (‘If I could kill him I’d die happy’) and, exasperatedly, has to help Hamm by looking through the two windows once again, but this time with a telescope. Since they describe the telescope as a ‘glass’, and they consider the view from two separate panes, one is once again unavoidably reminded of Duchamp. The blue sea and sky seen through one window, and the earth colours through the other, suggest the ‘Bride’ and ‘Bachelor’ panels of the Large Glass. The telescope also seems to owe something to the iconography of
the Large Glass. Clov observes the audience through it, with the comment: ‘That’s what I call a magnifier.’ Duchamp included a magnifying lens in the small glass To be looked at (from the other side of the glass) with one eye, close to, for almost an hour, and intended to include one in the Large Glass, in the position eventually occupied by the Mandala.

Clov’s lack of pity for Hamm becomes more understandable as the play proceeds; indeed, we share his frustration. In tones of whining, threatening bombast Hamm prevaricates, delays and digresses. In the end, he makes a complete fool of himself, wildly predicting that Clov will lie down, like a resigning King. Hamm is even hoping to Queen a pawn, that is to say, Mother Pegg, whose death he will not believe.

The culminating folly is his attempt to move with the aid of the gaff, an attempt which fails, and fails again towards the end of the play when he makes a last effort to understand the position. It is at this point that the spectre of Duchamp appears, in a form resembling Mr Endon:

Hamm: I knew a madman once who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter — and engraver. I had a great fondness for him. I used to go and see him, in the asylum. I’d take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness! (Pause) He’d snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes. (Pause) He alone had been spared. (Pause) Forgotten. (Pause) It appears the case is… was not so… unusual.’
In chess terms Hamm’s long speech seems to be a description of the careless play in the preceding middle-game, which has led to his present predicament. It would appear that, at some point one of Black’s Knights left a pawn unguarded. We have already heard that the place is full of corpses (i.e. taken pieces) and now Hamm moves once more, still aware of the hopelessness of his position, and still unable to understand it:

I’ll soon have finished with this story. (Pause) Unless I bring in other characters. (Pause) But where would I find them? (Pause) Where would I look for them? (Pause). He whistles. (Enter Clov.) Let us pray to God.

This move appears to mark a turning-point in the drama. Clov seems more confident. His feet have stopped hurting. He is beginning to put things in order. He is cool with Hamm who, in his turn, is still more desperate, as he perceives that at last he is losing. A pawn dies. Hamm parades his area, ‘sees’ the pole points, senses his defeat, but still cannot understand the position. He contemplates resigning (by lying down), but cannot, clinging foolishly to some hope:

Perhaps I could push myself out on the floor. (He pushes himself painfully off his seat, falls back again.) Dig my nails into the cracks and drag myself forward with my fingers. (Pause) There I’ll be, in the
old refuge, alone against the silence and..(he hesitates).. the stillness. If I can hold my peace, and sit quiet, it will be all over with sound and motion, all over and done with.

Instead, he moves again – disastrously. This penultimate move, then, is the one in which Whlte enters his principal domain in breach of opposition and, as we saw in the Lasker-Reichelm position, must win. The final exchanges between Hamm – and Clov serve to point up the absurdity of the position and, once again, the difference in play between Black and White:

HAMM: Do you know what’s happened?

CLOV: When? Where?

HAMM: (violently) When! what’s happened? Use your head, can’t you? What has happened?

CLOV: What for Christ’s sake does it matter?

HAMM: Before you go...(Clov halts near door)... say something.

CLOV: There is nothing to say.

HAMM: A few words...to ponder...in my heart.

CLOV: Your heart!

Coda

On the 10th January 1958, Marcel Duchamp and his wife Teeny attended the theatre in New York. In a letter to Henry

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Notes

I. Duchamp’s column was published every Thursday from 1937 to the outbreak of war. Ce Soir was edited by Louis Aragon.

II. The shapes of the three Inscriptions in the Cinematic Blossoming of the Bride were created by suspending meter squares of delicate gauze or lace above a radiator (also in front of an open window), photographing the resulting movements in the rising heat, and carefully transcribing their outlines onto the Glass.

III. It should perhaps be put on record at this point that, in a conference on ‘Art and Chess’ at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1991, Mme. Teeny Duchamp, the artist’s widow,
insisted that Marcel Duchamp had never played chess with Samuel Beckett. Quite what the motivation was for this denial is unclear, but the abundant evidence, however anecdotal, seems to contradict Teeny completely. She was herself a keen chess player, and had first met Duchamp in 1923. She married Pierre Matisse in 1929, and renewed her acquaintance with Marcel only in 1951, when they were married.

IV. Despite this history, Duchamp’s highest chess level was only Master (rather than Grandmaster). Out of nineteen tournament matches played between 1924 and 1933, his record was one win, eleven losses and seven draws.

V. In 1933, Duchamp translated Eugene Znosko-Borovsky’s book on chess openings into French, as Comment il faut commencer une partie d’échecs. This study of the other end of a chess game rather complements his own publication on endgames.

VI. Note that I have used the English, algebraic, square-naming chess notation, as opposed to the piece-naming system used by the authors.


VIII. Further correspondence between the present author and Deirdre Bair has failed to reveal the identity of this ‘Irish writer’.
IX. In his famous essay on *Endgame*, Adorno suggests that Hamm’s name refers to a castrated Hamlet, with the consequent associations of melancholy and blackness.

X. This note, in turn, originates in Alfred Jarry’s *Gestures and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*: ‘Why should anyone claim the shape of a watch is round – a manifestly false proposition - since it appears in profile as a narrow rectangular construction, elliptic on three sides; and why the devil should one only have noticed its shape at the moment of telling the time? – Perhaps under the pretext of utility. But a child who draws the watch as a circle will also draw a house as a square, as a facade, without any justification...’ (Shattuck and Watson Taylor, 1965, 193).

Wayne Andersen, Marcel Duchamp: The Failed Messiah

Wayne Andersen, Marcel Duchamp: The Failed Messiah (Geneva: Éditions Fabriart, 2010)

This book is an insult to the intelligence of anyone who believes that Marcel Duchamp was an important and influential figure in the history of modern art in the early years of the 20th century. It’s subtitle-The Failed Messiah-tells you pretty much everything. While not technically an oxymoron, within this context, the words “failed” and “messiah” contradict one another, for by definition, a messiah is one...
who succeeds in his quest, and even Duchamp’s most ardent detractors would find it difficult to argue that he didn’t. Even the author of this book, Wayne Anderson—an 82-year-old retired professor of history and architecture at MIT (and also a doubtlessly disgruntled academic)—tells us that what Duchamp did to the history of art is comparable to the impact of the meteor that killed the dinosaurs. His use of the word “failed,” therefore, must apply specifically to his own personal point of view, for Andersen believes that the adulation accorded Duchamp by the art establishment is unjustified, blown far out of proportion to what he perceives are the artist’s actual accomplishments. Since Anderson’s myopic view is shared by precious few, in writing this book he must have envisioned his own role as that of a messiah, someone who has valiantly stood up against all opposition to provide us with the correct path to aesthetic salvation, one that would have gone smoothly had Duchamp and his readymades not intervened.

Andersen’s greatest objection—and the reason he claims that motivated the writing of this book—is that Duchamp is increasingly identified as among the most important artists of the 20th century, and his urinal (titled Fountain) is repeatedly named the single most influential work of art made by any artist of the modern era (as confirmed by a survey of art professionals in England in 2004). He is most aggrieved by those who admire the urinal with the reverence accorded other great works of art. In a prologue to the book, Andersen declares Fountain and all copies of it a sham, in words that tellingly reflect his messianic theme: “Pilgrims by the daily hundreds come to one or the other of these shrines of modern art to contemplate with puzzlement and some in reverence this recumbent piece of plumbing as if it had closed down the Old and given rise to the New Testament of Art History.” The allusions to religion are not coincidental, for although I have no idea what faith Andersen practices (if any), his real objections to Duchamp are derived from a sense of moral
superiority, especially when it comes to the subjects of eroticism and sex (themes that run, admittedly, through Duchamp’s work from start to end). In the introduction to his book, Andersen openly confesses his prudish beliefs. “With sexual freedom comes degradation, since morals of any kind are generated by the immoralities of sex, like valor by cowardness [sic] or honesty by cheating. Yet, the whole biological purpose of each species’ existence is to breed for the next generation. The moral brain cannot always hold up pants and panties when desires press downward to where bodies generate dirt and from there upward to pictures drawn and enacted by dirty minds.” That he was thinking of Duchamp comes a few pages later. “Duchamp was a vulgar man with a dirty mind,” he writes, “sexual, not sensuous.”

The issue of bodies generating dirt and excrement is something that comes up repeatedly in Andersen’s critique of the urinal, and it is abhorrent to him that some might equate these thoughts within the realm of aesthetics. He is especially revolted by the fact that when a urinal is used, it requires the exposure of a man’s penis, something he repeats on no fewer than on four separate occasions in his text. Here is one: “The beauty constant and concomitant sexual urges are universal. Is it merely coincidental that every man, on stepping up to a urinal, opens his fly and takes out his member?” In an effort to place the urinal in an art-historical context, he places it at the end of a lineage marked by fifty-year intervals that begins with Manet’s Olympia (1863), continues with Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907), and concludes with the urinal. (Although Duchamp’s Fountain was conceived of in 1917, it was not recognized for its importance within the art establishment until the 1960s, allowing him to place it some fifty years after Picasso’s Demoiselles.) This observation causes him to pose the following question:

How is it that modern art, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century starts and finishes its first fifty-year
phase with representations of women not for adoring and
seducing or even raping but for just plain fucking? And ends
its second fifty-year phase with a urinal pretending to be a
fountain while asking to be pissed in. It is of course
biological for a man to approach a urinal as if it were a
woman. Each time he steps up to one, he open his fly and takes
out his member.

There he goes again with the penis reference. But in making
his point, it is worthwhile to ask why Andersen used the word
“fucking,” when he could just as easily have used any other
more socially acceptable euphemism for sexual intercourse? He
finds Duchamp’s sexual puns vulgar and distasteful, so on the
title page of the book (yes, on the title page), he issues the
following warning to his readers: “This book was written for
mature readers at an adult age. It contains words and
expressions that are suppressed as obscene wherever English or
French is spoken. And it includes quotations of texts by
others that are pornography in both the original language and
English translation.” Presumably, Andersen’s own words were
not translated from anywhere, so what could be his excuse for
resorting to such foul language?

In the end, what Andersen finds most objectionable is that the
art establishment has accepted Duchamp as having made a
legitimate contribution to its history, when he feels that the
artist is an outright charlatan. At one point, he even stoops
so low as to try making his own sexual pun by calling Duchamp
a con artiste [cunt artist], having found the Etant donnés to
be “one of the greatest domination assaults on a woman that
art history has recorded.” Throughout the text, Andersen
foolishly and quite naively states that the readymades are not
art, and he takes us through what he must believe is a logical
line of reasoning to dismiss them as such, constantly
reminding readers that when a readymade is returned to the
setting for which it was originally designed, it reverts back
to the object that it was. No kidding! Of course it does, but
that is precisely the point of these objects. Context is everything. Indeed, in the case of the readymades, when placed into a museum, it is their very raison d’être. What Andersen seems incapable of understanding is that the readymades are both things simultaneously: objects designed for a specific purpose and, when placed on display in a museum or art gallery, works of art. In a sense, they are conceptually akin an optical illusion, like the schematic drawing of a staircase, for example, that is comprised of steps that go up and down simultaneously. The problem is that our minds are limited in their capacity to see them going in both directions at the same time, but we are intelligent enough as human beings to know that they do. Apparently this simple concept is way over Andersen’s head. Either that or, if he understands it at all, he ignores the logic within it, for it does not facilitate his insistence that the readymades be dismissed as works of art.

In the introduction to his book, Andersen takes a swipe at university presses, many of which, we can be fairly safe in assuming, have rejected his manuscripts for publication. “Like mega-corporations in economics, academic presses control the trade,” he tells us, “five to ten university art editors with the power to determine what gets published.” The opinions of these highly qualified and informed individuals did little to deter Andersen, for he responded to their rejections by forming his own private printing press, a firm that goes by the name Editions Fabriart, which, on the copyright page of the Duchamp book is identified as an imprint of the consulting firm of Vesti Design. Only from the website for the publishing house (www.atlasbooks.com/marktplc/10215.htm) do we learn that Vesti Design is founded and owned by Wayne Andersen, and that Editions Fabriart publishes only the writings of one author: Wayne Andersen. Ostensibly, nothing is wrong with publishing your own writings (indeed, I plan to do so one day myself), but if not handled properly, the result can be an academic disaster, which is unquestionably the case with Andersen’s
book on Duchamp. To begin with, academic presses employ a peer-review process, something that would have caught the countless regrettable errors contained in this book and, anyone familiar with the literature on Duchamp and Dada, would have cut out at least half of the 388 pages of insufferable text by pointing out the simple fact that most of it has been published elsewhere and, in most cases, in writings based on primary source material. Andersen is certainly driven in his quest to defame Duchamp, but, apparently, he is not sufficiently motivated to seek out and read the appropriate literature on the artist, and least not enough to make a significant contribution of his own. Even when he does consult the appropriate sources, they are usually only skimmed, causing him to miss important details that could—in some instances—even have bolstered his argument. Anderson tells us, for example, that it will be his purpose in this book to strip Duchamp bare, to “peel away at his mythical overlays until he becomes shiveringly naked... under his wrappings of adulation.” With this in mind, he delves into the Duchamp biography, using Calvin Tomkins’s excellent book on the artist as his primary guide. In his summary, Andersen tells us that Duchamp “produced no children” (p. 157), but Tomkins is among the first to publish the fact that, in 1911, Jeanne Serre, a model who appeared in several paintings by the artist from this period (one of which, The Bush, Andersen reproduces), gave birth to his only biological daughter, Yvonne. She was never formally recognized as his offspring, but in the late 1960s, he met and established a close relationship with her during the last years of his life. In my review of the Duchamp retrospective that took place at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice in 1993, I connect the birth of this illegitimate child to the theme of the unobtainable, which I postulate figures into the making of not only the Large Glass, but also the Etant donnés. This review was not published in an obscure periodical, but rather appeared seventeen years ago as a full-length article in the pages of Art in America. Somehow, Andersen managed to
I realize that within the context of a book review, it is considered bad form to chastise an author for having failed to consult the reviewer’s publications, but I have devoted a good part of my scholarly career to writing not only about Duchamp, but also *New York Dada*. Whereas Andersen has read some of my writings on these subjects and even refers to them admiringly, they are mostly from anthologies, and he has missed the more important books, most notably my monograph on *New York Dada* (published in 1994) and the catalogue *Making Mischief: Dada Invades New York* (published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name that I organized for the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1996). Had he known these publications, he might have spared us his excruciatingly painful indictment of Duchamp’s friends and associates—Beatrice Wood, Mina Loy, Arthur Cravan, Man Ray, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven—all of whom are given separate chapters in my book. Even here, Andersen displays a remarkable ignorance of the most current literature on his subject: he gives a biographical sketch of Mina Loy, without knowing that the definitive book on this remarkable woman was written by Carolyn Burke and published in 1996, nor when he discusses the Stettheimer sisters does he seem to know anything about the biography of Florine Stettheimer written by Barbara Bloemink and published in 1995. He devotes an entire chapter to presenting what he believes is an original interpretation of Duchamp’s *Large Glass* by comparing it to a Rube Goldberg cartoon, which, he claims, is information repressed by Duchamp scholars. “I find no discussion or even mention of this cartoon in any academic essay devoted to a descriptive analysis of the *New York Dada* [magazine] texts or images,” he writes. In my own writings, I have discussed the Goldberg cartoon that appeared in *New York Dada* on at least two occasions: once when comparing it to the complex machinations of the *Large Glass*, and again when pointing out that the
twisted pipes it contains mimes the circuitous route of New York Dada through various European capitals. (5) Andersen has clearly not done his homework; these are the sort of literary lacunae for which any conscientious professor of art history would fail his students.

It is known that Andersen published this book without requesting permission from the Duchamp Estate (or the agency that represents them: The Artists Rights Society, or ARS) to reproduce the works by Duchamp that it contains. Rather, it appears that he scanned the images from various published sources, without bothering to request permission from the authors or the publishers whose labors he so freely appropriates. If Andersen can adopt such a moral high ground in criticizing Duchamp, how is it that he can so blatantly violate issues of copyright? Maybe this is just one of many duplicitous positions taken by a man who, in his twilight years, wishes to seek revenge from the same sort of institutions that rejected him (if true, I would recommend he heed the advice of Confucius: “Before you embark on a journey of revenge,” he warned, “dig two graves”). It was the art establishment, after all, that also understood and embraced the contradictions that lie at the core of Duchamp’s work, a philosophical conundrum that is implicit to its meaning. I find myself in an equally complex dilemma in writing this review, for allowing its publication can only serve to draw more attention to a book that presents no legitimate justification for its existence. To ignore it, however, would seem the greater injustice. Andersen’s objections with Duchamp are shared by comparatively few, yet a number are more influential critics, writers who, like himself, believe that Duchamp has no rightful place in the history of 20th century art. These writings can only serve to inhibit a greater understanding of Duchamp and his work, preventing honest and otherwise diligent students from engaging the serious issues that are necessary to fully comprehend its importance and meaning. Refuting such a biased and highly restrictive point
of view is—despite the consequences—a worthwhile endeavor.

Notes

1. The book is also filled with a plethora of typos and clerical errors. At one point, Andersen says that only he has read the text, which is regrettable, for even a casual reader would have caught mistakes in the sequence of footnotes that occur in several places (most notably in chapter 5, where the footnotes start to renumber themselves, a detail ignored where the footnotes themselves appear at the back of the book). This creates a real headache for serious scholars, but as I hope to demonstrate, it is indicative of the way in which the author so casually treats the literature he consults.

2. See Francis M. Naumann, “The Bachelor’s Quest,” Art in America 81/9 (September 1993), pp. 72-81, 67, 69


Duchamp’s “underground” career—decades ostensibly away from the art world in pursuit of chess—is a touchstone for youthful artist Mark Bloch, who has taken the gameboard out of the underground and back into the museum gallery in his recent series, Storage Museums. There’s an element of travel chess here too, not to mention the Museum in a Suitcase.
Early in 1911, at the age of 24, Marcel Duchamp painted a relatively small painting (25 7/8 by 19 3/4 inches, oil on canvas) he called *Young Man and Girl in Spring*. ¹ This painting is also identified as *Spring*, which is how the painting is referred to throughout this paper. A larger version (58 5/8 x 19 3/4 inches, oil on canvas) followed. This second version was exhibited at the 1911 Salon d’Automne in Paris.² Although no photograph of the entire second painting is known to exist, part of it is visible—now repositioned horizontally—as the background of Duchamp’s *Network of Stoppages* of 1914.

What follows is an analysis of the first version of *Spring* and its role in Duchamp’s larger creative output. Some of my ideas, as well as my interpretations and conclusions, draw on the large and ever-growing body of scholarly literature on Duchamp. However, my observations and ideas are shaped by my perspective as a practicing artist. Quite intentionally, I have tried to follow the logic of Duchamp’s creative process and his artistic decision-making strategies from the standpoint of his being a visual artist. I offer what follows in that spirit.

In this paper, I explore the possibility that *Spring* contains pre-figurative elements of Duchamp’s final magnum opus, *Étant donnés (Given: 1° The Waterfall, 2° The Illuminating Gas)*, created between 1946 and 1966. That a small, sketchy painting made thirty-five years earlier could be seen as a study for the confounding, elaborate installation that is *Étant donnés* may strike readers as somewhat improbable. Nevertheless, through careful scrutiny of Duchamp’s artwork and the many notes he made, it is my opinion that very early on—Duchamp
planned and prepared for the major works he would eventually produce. I acknowledge that this process is highly unusual, that most artists develop their styles over a period of time, with any one piece or style representing a point on a trajectory of development and maturation. It is well known Marcel Duchamp used ideas he had formulated years before their actual implementation. As Michael Taylor observes: “The pseudoscientific title of Etant donnes has its source in a note first published in 1934 known as the Green Box: “Etant donnes 1° la chute d’eau / 2° legaz d’eclairage.”

**Part I**

Although it is uncharacteristically rough in execution, *Spring* is a fully realized composition (Fig. 1).

click images to enlarge

![Figure 1](image)

*Figure 1*

*Spring (Young Man and Girl in Spring)*, 1911. Oil on canvas, 25 7/8 x 19 3/4 in. (65.7 x 50.2 cm.). Israel Museum of Art, Jerusalem

The artist apparently deemed this painting important enough to offer it as a wedding present to his favorite sister, Suzanne, who married a Rouen pharmacist, Charles Desmares, on August 24, 1911. On the back of the canvas Duchamp wrote, “A toi ma chere Suzanne –Marcel” (“To my dear Suzanne –Marcel”).

Perhaps due to the painting’s uncharacteristically loose, expressionistic execution, some scholars assert that *Spring* is merely a loose study. However, the existence of an India ink
and charcoal study for the female figure of *Spring*, also dated 1911 and titled *Standing Nude* (Fig. 2), adds weight to the argument that *Spring* is an autonomous work, not a preliminary sketch.  

The two versions of *Spring* can be seen as the final symbolic allegorical group of works that Duchamp began painting in April 1910 with *Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel*. The others in this group include *The Bush* (1910), *Paradise* (December 1910–January 1911), *The Baptism* (1911), and *Draft on the Japanese Apple Tree* (1911).

*Spring* is an allegorical painting set in a landscape of tree forms. Most prominent in the composition are the two elongated, up-reaching figures, which occupy the frontal plane and extend from the lower to upper margins of the painting on both sides.

Both figures are delineated by black contour lines. On the left is a female nude; on the right is a male whose genitals
are obscured by a thong-like covering. The back of the female’s head is visible as a cap of dark hair; except for her chin, her face is blocked by the closer arm, which, like her other arm, is thrust upward toward a canopy of leaves. Both of the female’s arms are rendered twice (Fig. 3), visually suggesting waving limbs. This depiction of sequential positions in space essentially constitutes Duchamp’s original attempts to paint a figure in motion a year before his two versions of *Nude Descending a Staircase*, of 1912.

The male figure extends his right arm into the tree leaves. His other arm is bent above his faceless head, the hand in a fist. The feet are roughed in. Just below his feet is a patch of ochre that is deeper in tone than the field of ochre dominating the lower right quadrant. It is in this area Duchamp signed the work in block letters followed by an 11, signifying the year of its production, 1911.

The top of the painting is filled with a canopy of tree leaves defined at its lower edge by angled black lines. The central area of the canopy is yellow, with an uneven upper band of
white pigment suggesting sunlight streaming from above. Surrounding these leaves and the slender black tree trunk is a section of lightened blue. The black line of the tree trunk doubles as the center indentation of an unmistakable heart shape, which occupies most of the composition. Leading Duchamp scholar Francis Naumann, in his essay on *Spring*, was the first to notice this large geometrically simplified shape for a human heart. The bottom V shape of the heart passes behind the lower torsos of the two figures. The left outline of the swelling V doubles as the thin, curving trunk of a tree or sapling. Its leaves or blossoms extend from the left behind the female’s lower back. The shape and hue of these leaves, along with the bent trunk, recall the tree form in another painting by Duchamp in 1911, *Draft on the Japanese Apple Tree* (Figs. 4 and 5). This can be seen as an early example of Duchamp’s recycling of pictorial content from one piece to another, a practice examined in the pages that follow.

In the area at upper – far left, behind the pink-budded tree, is another tree with a simple, straight black trunk. Over a dark green area are about a dozen daubs of white, red, and green that help define the tree’s form. On the right side, surrounding the upper torso of the male figure, are circular shapes outlined in black which I believe were meant to represent trees. These are less realized than those on the left side and are not painted in.

The center of the entire composition and consequently at the center of the heart shape, is a circle whose circumference is energetically and repeatedly drawn with black crayon or oil pastel. Within this circle is rendered a small, pinkish
figure, whose back is positioned to roughly align with the black tree trunk of the central tree. Head tilted to the left, its face, like the two nude figures, is featureless. One leg is straight down, while the leg on the right is raised and bent downward at the knee. One arm is extended, and the other arm is not visible.

This overdrawn circle also loops down in ovoid strokes that cut across the profile head of a fourth human figure, also with a featureless face. The legs of this figure appear to be folded in a kneeling position and are partially cropped by the arced line of the heart outlined on the right. A coat with tails can be interpreted, draped over the kneeling figure’s shoulders.\(^8\)

Located toward the top left of the kneeling figure is a series of round shapes, modeled in pink/red and white. Small jots of black seem to indicate tree trunks, possibly an allusion to a small grove of trees, executed almost like a child’s simplistic rendering of “lollipop trees” complete with short, vertical black jots for trunks. Interspersed with the pink/red colors are similar shapes in grey. Their uniform size, combined with a stacked symmetry of placement, is not convincingly organic in nature. The staggered symmetry of these uniform-sized boulder shapes is akin to the appearance of brick wall construction. Even the hue is reminiscent of the color of bricks. This aspect creates some ambiguity in their appearance. Other shapes, more loosely formed, are found to the right of the kneeling figure’s profile.

The V point of the prominent heart shape outline in combination with the two figures’ straight legs approximates the letter \(M\). (Fig. 6) This is the first example of Duchamp’s embedding one of his initials into his works, a practice he would continue throughout his career.
Part II

Spring is noteworthy in several ways. Its two leaping figures are overtly exuberant and make this Duchamp’s most expressionistically emotional painting. Positioned on either side of the composition, streamlined and elongated to extend over most of the vertical dimension of the work, they create a framing device for the encircled central figure. That their faces are without features supports their function as a formal device, although without diminishing their symbolic intent.

The forceful circles drawn repeatedly around the central figure in the outlined heart shape visually emphasize the importance of this element, especially the circle’s placement in the middle of the composition. On close examination, the rough quality of line points to the use of oil pastel or crayon applied over thick, dried oil paint, not to the blending-in that is usual in oil painting. In other words, these circles were drawn over the composition after it was painted (Fig. 7). Perhaps Duchamp came to realize that he could achieve a visceral effect by “roughly” circling this centrally placed element. In any case, it is clear that his intention was to emphasize this part of the painting.
Considering the relatively long time oils take to dry, it is conceivable that the painting was completed before the attributed date of early 1911. If this is the case, it would not be the first time Duchamp mistakenly dated one of his works.⁹

That being said, I would like to comment on Arturo Schwarz’s interpretation regarding the possible intent behind the figure enclosed within a circle as representing Mercurius in a bottle. The figure of Mercurius (Mercury) was a commonly used alchemical image symbolizing the universal agent of transformation.¹⁰ Schwarz illustrates an eighteenth-century woodcut for visual comparison (Fig. 8).

As mentioned earlier, Figure 7 is a detail from Figure 1, *Spring*: crayon lines circling the central figure.
Duchamp addressed his interest in alchemy on a variety of occasions. He responded to biographer Robert Lebel's question about his connection to the subject with the following statement: “If I have practiced alchemy it was in the only way it can be done now, that is without knowing it.”

While some art historians agree on this interpretation, like most matters concerning Duchamp’s creations, other viewpoints abound. Both Naumann and Duchamp biographer Calvin Tomkins reject Schwarz’s alchemy theory in favor of the notion that *Spring* can be read as an affirmative statement about marriage. Naumann suggests that the figure in the globe is possibly prophetic of the married couple’s newborn-to-be.

A different perspective is expressed by another Duchamp biographer, Alice Goldfarb Marquis, and art historian Jerrold Seigel, both of whom believe there is not one figure but “several dancing figures” in the circle. Pierre Cabanne, another expert and a personal friend of Duchamp’s, says of the central circle in *Spring* that it contains “ill defined forms.”

An unusual, if not perplexing, interpretation of this circle
comes from philosopher and art historian Thierry de Duve. In his book *Pictorial Nominalism*, de Duve acknowledges other interpretations of the orb, including Schwarz's alchemy comparisons and Maurizio Calvesi's reference to vessels in Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (ca. 1500). De Duve's opinion is that it could well be inspired by the small circular convex mirror in Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife Giovanna Cenamani*, or *The Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* (1434).\(^{16}\) However unique a theory, especially because of the wedding connection, it seems an unlikely source considering that the famous convex mirror in van Eyck's painting reflects the images of three figures, the bride and groom as well as the painter himself, none remotely resembling the singular figure in the orb.

At this point, an examination of the specific emblem Schwarz identified is warranted. In 1718, Leiden chemistry professor Johann Conrad Barchusen had a series of seventy-eight emblems engraved, titled *Elementa chemiae*, which are meant to allegorically represent the specific process of alchemical transmutation known as “the wet way,” as opposed to the shorter process called “the dry way.”

The Mercurius emblem that Schwarz chose as comparable to the central figure in *Spring* is close to the end of Barchusen's sequence, at number seventy-five. The caption for this emblem has been translated as follows: “After much suffering and torment I was resurrected large and pure and immaculate.”\(^{17}\) The sentiments associated with Barchusen’s Mercurius do not mesh in an illustrative sense on any level, alchemical or otherwise, in terms of celebrating newlyweds.

I would like to offer another observation on this small figure, however unconventional, along with a different general point of view about *Spring*. The positioning of the legs—one straight, one bent and the only visible arm outstretched and extended within a small patch of bright paint directly above a
small black line where the hand would appear—are uncannily familiar.

These forms, including a head-like shape tilted to the left, very closely approximates the reclining nude holding a lantern in *Étant donnés* With this visual correspondence in mind, the circle can be understood as an allusion to a peephole placed in the center of the figurative framing devise through which a scene is viewed, a vantage point consistent with his final creation. In addition but possibly just coincidental, the yellow linear device in *Spring*, which extends vertically below the outstretched arm on the right, might be seen as a visual symbol of a waterfall. *(Fig. 9)*

...
The representation of a kneeling figure had lasting importance for Duchamp. In 1967 he produced eighteen drypoint etchings which are included in the second volume of Arturo Schwarz’s Complete Works, The Large Glass and Related Works. Half of these were devoted to The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even, while the other half formed a suite called The Lovers.

Of the latter, one print depicts a female figure kneeling as if in prayer; significantly, it is titled The Bride Stripped Bare. Besides the obvious connection with the full title for the The Large Glass, (The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even), the drawing creates a full-circle connection with the first work of Duchamp’s to bear this title, a drawing produced in 1912 while he was in Munich. These 1967 prints were some of Duchamp’s last artworks, created before the public was made privy to the Étant donnés installation, which, as he had specified, happened only after his death. Whatever his intentions, it is noteworthy that Duchamp in his final days would return to the theme of kneeling/prayer imagery first addressed in depth in his early allegorical paintings,
many of which depicted figures in this position.

Let us return to the meaning of the two leaping figures in Spring. In the first comprehensive catalog of Duchamp’s work Robert Lebel speculates that the painting is a response to the loss of the youthful closeness of his siblings: “Both his brothers were married and his sister wedded a pharmacist from Rouen in 1911: these were just so many assaults upon the ties of childhood for one who was to remain so long the “bachelor.”

I believe the most original supposition as to what inspired Spring is offered by Alice Goldfarb Marquis in her biography of Duchamp, Marcel Duchamp: Eros, C’est la vie. Prior to painting Spring in early 1911, Duchamp had a relationship with a model, Jeanne Serre, who is believed to be one of the figures represented in the 1910 painting The Bush. This relationship produced Duchamp’s only child, born February 6, 1911. Marquis believes it is possible that the birth of this child, named Yo, and the end of the affair might be the actual inspiration for Spring.

Schwarz and Cabanne share the opinion that the two reaching figures represent Suzanne and Marcel, Schwarz insisting that Marcel was opposed to the wedding. And while these bordering figures may or may not be Duchamp’s primary focus for Spring, they are clearly presented as symbolic of something—seen in the pair’s action of reaching upward.

The specific, emotive body language is another thing that separates this painting from Duchamp’s other allegorical works of 1910–1911. Those paintings are obscure in their symbolism. The glowing hand in the Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel is inexplicable beyond, perhaps, referring to this doctor’s “miraculous curative powers”; the relationships between the couples in Paradise, The Bush, and Baptism are all seemingly symbolic in intent, and yet they are stubbornly ambiguous. The
odd, Buddha-like figure in *Draft on the Japanese Apple Tree* is bafflingly arcane.

The essay Schwarz wrote for *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* describes the *Spring* figures’ arms “lifted to the sky in a Y-shaped figure.”\(^2\) Actually, the arms of the two figures do not form the shape of any letter, much less Y, as they reach up into the leaves of the tree. However, there is a Y shape drawn in the space between the figures’ arms. *(Fig. 11)*

![Figure 11](image-url)

**Figure 11**

*Detail of fig. 1, Spring: outline of Y shape.*

This constitutes the top connection of the two orbs of the linear heart shape while doubling as the image of the centrally placed tree trunk. Returning to the small encircled figure, we see that not only is it placed in the painting’s center, but it is also at the center of the heart shaped symbol. Surely the symbolic metaphor of something being “central to one’s heart” would not escape Duchamp’s attention in this time frame.
In writings about *Spring*, one often encounters interpretations of the purpose for the upward stretch of the two figures. Are they reaching for fruit from the Tree of Life, or perhaps the apple in the Garden of Eden? No, there is no discernable fruit of any kind in this painting. (The absence of fruit makes sense in view of the title *Spring*, when fruit is not mature and ripe for picking.)

The top center of the canvas is a discernibly lighter yellow/white than the green abstracted “leaves” on either side. In other words, strong sunlight is clearly suggested as it filters through the tree leaves. I propose that the two figures are enacting, allegorically, the act of “reaching for the sun.”

Duchamp addressed the subject of the sun at least two other times. In 1911, the same year *Spring* was conceived, Duchamp illustrated several poems by Jules Laforge, one of which is *Once More to This Star*, also translated as *Another for the Sun*. Jerrold Seigel offers this synopsis of the poem: "The sun exchanges insults with the earthlings it threatens to warm no longer . . . once the old waning star has died."\(^{21}\) Another example is a simple drawing from 1914 entitled *To Have an Apprentice in the Sun*. On a sheet of music staff paper, it depicts a figure struggling uphill on a bicycle. Duchamp believed it noteworthy enough to include it in his first compilation of reproductions of significant works, known as the Box of 1914.

**Part III**

After painting the two versions of *Spring* Duchamp switched gears stylistically and executed notes, works, and studies that culminated in *The Large Glass*, as well as his final painting in 1918, *Tu m’*. Duchamp began developing his ideas through extensive note-taking for future projects. The late Walter Hopps, who was responsible for organizing Duchamp’s first retrospective in the United States, provided a succinct
analysis for the overall import of these notes: “Although they were not published until 1934, some of the notes in *The Green Box* date back to before 1915 [the year] when Duchamp started fabricating *The Large Glass*. These notes are the complete scheme for and the literary form of *The Large Glass*, which is itself like a circuit diagram or even cybernetic abstraction. In *Étant donnés, The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* becomes a strange and magical three-dimensional tableau, and Duchamp’s magnum opus is now complete: a work that exists in conceptual, diagrammatic, and figurative form.”²²

It is conceivable that after he realized *the Large Glass* and *Tu m’*-in effect crossing them off his “to do” list–Duchamp gave himself the rest of his life to actualize his third and final pre-planned major project. In doing so he freed himself to pursue other interests that would occupy him over the years: the “production” of a variety of readymades, his close involvement with the presentation of ground-breaking art exhibitions which radically challenged accepted practices, and of course the pursuit of his lifelong fascination with the game of chess. The notion that he planned out his entire artistic output before its execution can be compared to the method of a superior chess player, who has the capacity to figure out his moves and strategies well beforehand. Most significantly, this mode of operation would grant him the one thing he claimed to value over all else: personal freedom.

Another look at *Network of Stoppages*–Duchamp’s 1914 painting produced over the second version of *Spring*–is warranted in order to understand his creative process. *(Fig. 12)*

click images to enlarge
It is revealing how several different projects dovetailed in one another. Put another way, in quick succession, different projects were manifest in a single work. With his pre-existing notes for The Large Glass (its dimensions, the “capillary tubes” element, and the premise for 3 Standard Stoppages, in particular) this was not a matter of having one epiphany after another. This was the application of pre-formulated thought born of copious note-making.

In 1913 Duchamp had developed his first schematic plans for The Large Glass. A year later, the experiment in his notes on The Idea of Fabrication would culminate in the production of three ruler/templates called 3 Standard Stoppages. This information and these devices would be applied to Network of Stoppages. Black bands of paint were applied to both sides of the second Spring, producing a space that is exactly half-scale of The Large Glass’s dimensions. The three constructed Stoppages templates were used to create the Network of Stoppages in a configuration that would later serve two functions for The Large Glass: the small circles were inserted throughout the array of curved lines that indicated an aerial view of the placement of the nine “bachelors” (also known as Malic Moulds). The linear design is also the first rendition of the Large Glass’s “capillary tube” element, the series of lines incised into Large Glass which traverse the forms that constitute the bachelors/Malic Moulds.
Here we have a total of six interlocking projects that evolve into one another with a common goal in mind: the second version of *Spring*; 3 Standard Stoppages templates; *Network of Stoppages* painting, which includes *The Large Glass* in half-scale dimensions, the positioning of the bachelors, and the first version of the capillary tubes.

In relation to his later work, *Spring* can be chronologically positioned. If it is not the first-draft study for *Étant donnés*, it is at least a premonition of some of the most important visual elements central to this last work: a reclining figure, one arm raised and holding aloft what I perceive to be a lit lantern near a waterfall, as glimpsed through a peephole that must be viewed through an opening in a constructed brick wall. The cloaked kneeling figure in *Spring* represents the voyeur, a well-known subject of interest to the artist. In fact, the classic pose of a voyeur is a person crouching or kneeling in order to spy through a keyhole. Because *Étant donnés* must be viewed through two peepholes, the viewer is essentially transformed into a voyeur—one who takes in a scene privately.23

Another general visual interpretation of *Spring* symbolically situates it in a time/space continuum, an allusion to the eventual realization of *Étant donnés*. The two border figures are situated on the green and yellow circular shapes formed by the negative space on either side of the large outlined heart symbol, in other words, “hills.” Viewed thus, the circle/peephole with the small figure can be perspectively construed as being far off in the distance. We know that at the time he painted *Spring*, Duchamp was interested in allegory and symbolism and was sufficiently intrigued by Symbolist poetry to do a series of illustrations based on poems by Symbolist poet Jules Laforgue. Perhaps symbolically this circle/peephole device illustrates something taking place in the future—“over the hills and far away”—at a time when Duchamp planned to actually construct the *Étant donnés*
Based on the belief that Spring is in fact the first study for Étant donnés and that it was executed even before studies for The Large Glass had commenced, perhaps its intention as merely a wedding gift is an oversimplification of Duchamp’s more serious concern. Knowing its long-range significance, he could have given it to his favorite sister for safekeeping. I believe Duchamp intentionally inscribed only his sister’s name to emphasize her sole ownership if the marriage did not work out. (If this were the case, it proved to be a wise move and is an example of Duchamp’s astute forward thinking; the marriage ended in divorce seven years later.) Through the course of Duchamp’s life and extensive travels, many works of his were lost, yet Suzanne still had this painting in her possession at the time of her death in 1963.

Spring was never included in any version of Boîte-en-valise, the purpose of which was the presentation (at small scale) of all of the works he believed of import in his career. One other major work, Étant donnés, was left out, for the reason that only after he died, as per his instructions, was it to made be known. Thus, it seems appropriate that because his last, secret masterpiece would have to be absent from his portable museum, the first painting, Spring, that led to it was excluded as well.

With these observations in mind, it is my assertion that Marcel Duchamp’s intent was to conclude his artistic career by coming full circle back to his original study, Spring. His artistic interests and aspirations remained true to his early allegorical works, which had, in fact, eclipsed his earlier forays into landscape and portraiture. The allegorical works were his first truly original expressions. Spring is representative of his study for his ultimate allegory—Étant donnés.

I believe that his major works, beginning with Spring in 1911,
along with 3 \textit{Standard Stoppages} and the readymade concept, were planned out in the mind and in his notes in a concentrated period of time before their execution by several years and even decades later.

Granted, it is almost incomprehensible that an artist so early in his career could possibly have schemed, organized, and internalized such an intense cavalcade of interrelated artworks or made plans to unfurl future creations over the course of his lifetime. On the other hand, the incomparable and ever-elusive Marcel Duchamp was possibly the only artist who could attempt and pull off such a timed-release, sustained process of creation.

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§ My thanks to Francis M. Naumann for his support and encouragement and to my editor, Julia Moore, for helping me craft this article.

\textbf{Notes}


2 Francis M. Naumann, \textit{The Mary Sisler Collection}. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984: 172. In 1914 Duchamp applied black paint over the original left and right margins of the painting and rotated it counterclockwise 90°. The most recognizable image is that of a female nude, seen on her back because of the rotation. The rest of what remains of the painting is blurred, as if by a wash of thinned paint. The details, which must have been quite clear originally, are now mostly unrecognizable. The “recumbent” female figure is the
exception. She appears to be more fully realized in detail than the woman in the first Spring.


4 After Suzanne died 1963, *Spring* came into the possession of the New York City art gallery Cordier & Ekstrom and then was bought for the Mary Sisler Collection. Duchamp scholar Arturo Schwarz collection acquired it from Sisler and in time donated it to the Israel Museum of Art, where it is today. Schwarz notes that the painting was relined in the 1960s, covering over the inscription. Arturo Schwarz, *Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* Rev. and expanded paperback edition (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2000): 546.

5 This drawing study is almost the exact same size as *Spring*, measuring 25 5/8 x 18 3/4 inches. The simple contour of the nude is so closely copied at the same scale that it is not inconceivable that it was used as a direct transfer for the painting. The figure is allegedly a model named Reina who appears in a similar pose in an engraving by Duchamp’s oldest brother, Jacques Villon (Schwarz, 2000: 546.)

6 Although it is often asserted that there is fruit of some sort in this tree depiction, none in fact is represented. The title of the work specifies spring.
That Duchamp would depict a kneeling figure is significant. With the exception of the Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel, the first painting in his allegorical style, there are kneeling figures in all of Duchamp’s allegorical works. Further, in 1910, the same year of the Dumouchel portrait, he produced four pen-and-ink drawings, all titled Study for Kneeling Nude.

Speaking with Pierre Cabanne about the illustration he made for Jules Laforgue’s Once More to This Star, Duchamp stated, “I had put a stupid date below, 1912, when it had been done in November 1911, and I dedicated it to [F. C.] Torrey in 1913. When you compare the dates, you say, ‘that’s impossible.’ An amusing mess.” Pierre Cabanne, Conversations with Marcel Duchamp (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971): 46.


In his book *Ingres: Erotic Drawings*, art historian and critic Stephane Guegan includes a section devoted to Ingres and voyeurism. The chapter concludes, in part, with the following statement: “The theme of the vulnerable, reclining woman, viewed from the front or back, left other traces, often of a passably licentious aura, among the drawings Ingres bequeathed to his birthplace. On one is written: ‘One who looks in at the door.’ This confirms Ingres’ calculated voyeurism, more subtle than is sometimes thought.” Stephane Guegan, *Ingres: Erotic Drawings* (Paris, Flammarion, 2006): 59. The subject of Ingres’ interest is noteworthy in relation to Duchamp’s. Included in Duchamp’s final series of etchings, *The Lovers*, he paid homage to a few artists he apparently held in high esteem. One print is based on a work by Rodin, another on a Courbet. But he must have had particular admiration for Ingres, for he based two compositions on paintings by the older master.
Belle Haleine: Eau de Voilette [Beautiful Breath: Veil Water], 1921

Assisted readymade: Rigaud perfume bottle with label created by Duchamp and Man Ray, bottle 6” (15.2 cm) high, in an oval, violet-colored cardboard box, 6 7/8 x 4 7/8 inches (16.3 x 11.2 cm); inscribed on gold label attached to the back of the box: Rrose / Sélavy / 1921

Belle Haleine: Eau de Voilette [Beautiful Breath: Veil Water] is the amusing title Marcel Duchamp gave to a work of art that he made—with the assistance of Man Ray—in the spring of 1921. At first glance, it appears to be little more than an ordinary perfume bottle, although readers of French might confuse it with a mouth wash, which, if consumed, would give them, as the label indicates, belle haleine [beautiful breath]. We now know that in order to produce this work, Duchamp appropriated an actual bottle of perfume issued by the Rigaud Company of Paris in 1915 for “Un air embaumé,” the name given to the most
popular and best-selling fragrance the perfumery had produced in its sixty-five year history. Advertisements for this product feature a scantily clad female model holding a bottle of the perfume below her nostrils,

click to enlarge

Figure 1
Advertisement for Un Air Embaumé, Rigaud Perfume, La Rire no. 88 (9 October 1920)

the essence of the liquid rendered visible as an undulating, ribbon-like shape floating through the air. The model is shown taking a deep breath, her eyes closed and head tilted slightly back, as if to suggest that the scent possess the qualities of an aphrodisiac, rendering powerless all who inhale its intoxicating vapors. It may have been precisely these qualities that attracted Duchamp to this particular brand of perfume, for he wished to draw attention to the woman whose features are depicted on the bottle, his newly introduced female alter-ego: Rose Sélavy.

Rose Sélavy was born by self-procreation in 1920. Duchamp—who was then living in New York and who, for years, had harbored a personal and professional disdain for entrenched, academic systems within the world of art—sought to establish an entirely new artistic identity. Just as he had invented the pseudonym of R. Mutt three years earlier (when, in 1917, he boldly submitted a white porcelain urinal to an art exhibition
with infamous results), this time he wanted something more permanent, an alternative persona through which he could hide his true identity while continuing to function as an artist. “The first idea that came to me was to take a Jewish name,” he later explained. “I was Catholic, and it was a change to go from one religion to another! I didn’t find a Jewish name that I especially liked, or that tempted me, and suddenly I had an idea: why not change sex? It was much simpler. So the name Rrose Sélavy came from that.”¹ The name Rose Sélavy not only succeeds in changing gender, but, to a somewhat lesser extent, the Jewish identity he originally desired. Sélavy is a close phonetic equivalent of Halévy, a common Jewish name in France. Moreover, in America the name Sélavy could be pronounced “Say Levy,” but of course the most obvious pun is with the French phrase “c’est la vie” [that’s life].² Almost immediately, Rose was credited with the production of works of art, such as Duchamp’s Fresh Widow—a miniature French window with its panes covered by black leather (Museum of Modern Art, New York)—which, on its support, is inscribed in bold uppercase letters: “COPYRIGHT ROSE SELAVY 1920.”

Although Rose Sélavy was already functioning as an artist, it was not until the winter of 1920-21 that Duchamp decided that she should become visibly manifest, so he enlisted the services of his friend and colleague Man Ray to help take pictures of himself in drag.

click to enlarge
He printed one of the pictures he had taken of Rose Sélavy and closely cropped the head into an ovoid format, which he placed atop a symmetrical design in black ink meant to fit within the wing-like, decorative shapes that emanate from the base of the Rigaud perfume bottle. He then carefully wrote the word BELLE in ascending letters on the left side of the label, followed by the word HALEINE descending on the right. Below that, he wrote Eau de Voilette in an expressive italic font, underneath which appear the letters “RS,” the initials of Rose Sélavy (the “R” rendered backwards, its lower branch responding to the flourish given to the seraph atop of the letter “S”). At the base of the label appears the locations where, presumably, the perfume would be sold—New York and Paris—two city centers that Duchamp traversed frequently during these years (indeed, he probably purchased the bottle during a trip to Paris in 1919). A photograph of the layout was reduced in size to fit the small format of the perfume bottle, whereupon the resultant print was then carefully glued to its surface. The finished product made its first public appearance on the cover of New York Dada, a single-issue magazine edited by Duchamp and Man Ray that was released in April 1921.

The bottle was placed in the center of the cover and surrounded by a seemingly endless repetition of the typewritten words “new york dada april 1921” printed in lower-case letters and positioned upside-down in an exceptionally small font that ran to the edges of the cover, the whole cast, appropriately, in a reddish, rose-colored hue.

Exactly whose idea it was to reproduce this bottle on the cover of *New York Dada* is unknown, but we do know that, at the time, both Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp had hoped that the Dada movement—which had originated in Europe and spread quickly throughout various European capitals—would continue to broaden its scope internationally. In a metaphorical sense, then, the artists may have equated the ability of a fragrance to permeate its surroundings with the convention-defying capabilities of Dada to influence all the arts. Unfortunately, however, at the time the Dada movement was in the process of breathing its last breath, for within a matter of years, it would be replaced by Surrealism in Paris, while the artists in New York either left for Europe or retreated to more conventional forms of artistic expression. The seed of Dada would eventually germinate, but only about a half century later, when a group of young artists in London, New York and...
Paris became aware of Duchamp’s work—particularly the readymades—and immediately recognized its radical aesthetic implications. Ironically, this scenario reinforces a possible alternate reading to the words “un air embaumé,” which translates literally as “perfumed air,” but which, in English, could also be read as “embalmed air.” Indeed, it has recently been observed that the box in which the perfume was packaged—which was preserved and is intended to be part of the final work of art—is curiously shaped like a coffin. Like a mummy enwrapped in cloth and preserved for eternity, it would seem that today—with the artist’s uncontested influence on the development of contemporary art—Duchamp’s bottle of perfume has finally been opened, allowing for the diffusion of an alluring spirit that virtually everyone can now readily detect.

Rigaud was the perfect fragrance for Duchamp to have selected. Not only was it a known and popular French brand of perfume, but its exotic qualities—which the firm emphasized in all of its advertisements—was an ideal fragrance for the somewhat vulgar and lascivious Rrose to endorse. In an advertisement that appeared in Harper’s Monthly, it is implied
that Un Air Embaumé was a scent that originated in an unspecified Arab country located somewhere in the Middle East; it depicts a harem girl gesturing toward a peacock with one hand, while she uses the other hand to hold back a curtain revealing the interior of a darkened boudoir.

Figure 5
Advertisement for Un Air Embaumé, Rigaud Perfume Company,

There, a couple inclines on a bed, while a gold bottle of Rigaud floats mysteriously above their heads, glowing in the darkness like an apparition. Another advertisement that appeared in several American fashion magazines shows a woman seated in her dressing room, visible to viewers through an open curtain door.

“A peep into the boudoir of any much sought-after woman,” the caption reads, “will usually reveal some RIGAUD odeur as the real secret of her power to fascinate men.” In small print at the bottom of the page, the advertisement informs prospective buyers that, if purchased for yourself or as a gift, the fragrance is assured to have an enduring effect. “Un air embaumé is one of the most loved of Rigaud odeurs. It is the type of rare fragrance that a woman clings to devotedly for
In June of 1921—a few months after the appearance of *New York Dada*—Duchamp returned to Paris, where, later in the year, he signed a large painting by Picabia entitled *L’Oeil cacodylate* (Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris) with the name Rrose Sélavy, spelling the name Rrose for the first time with a double-r. Later he said that this was required, for, as he explained, “the word ‘arrose’ demands two R’s.” Clearly Duchamp intended to evoke a pun on the word “eros,” for Rrose Sélavy is a homonym for the phrase “eros c’est la vie” [eros, that’s life]. Although less often acknowledged, the double-r might also have been derived from the French verb *arroser*, which means to wet or moisten, an appropriate word considering the obviously erotic connotations of perfume, which the manufacturer wanted users to think offered one of the first elements of attraction in any successful amorous encounter. Duchamp later signed the box of his perfume bottle with the name Rrose Sélavy (using the double-r), and gave it to Yvonne Chastel-Crotti, the ex-wife of his former studio-mate in New York, Jean Crotti (a Swiss-
born painter who had married Duchamp’s sister Suzanne), a woman with whom Duchamp had had his own brief amorous encounter in 1918.\(^5\)

The bottle remained in Yvonne Crotti’s possession throughout her life, and although it had been included in a group show of collage in Paris in 1930, it was shown for the first time within the context of Duchamp’s work in an exhibition organized by the Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery in New York in 1965.\(^6\) It was there that the object was first identified as an “assisted readymade,” indicating that—as with all other readymades—the object itself already existed, but required some alteration, that is to say, assistance on Duchamp’s part in order to bring it into being as a work of art. That assistance resulted in having created one of the most provocative works of art ever made, a simple bottle of perfume whose liquid long ago evaporated, but whose essence, to be sure, will continue to influence artists long into the future.

This text was first published as the entry on Duchamp’s Belle Haleine: Eau de violette in the sales catalogue Collection Yves Saint Laurent et Pierre Bergé, Christie’s Paris, 23 February 2009, lot no. 37.

Notes:


2 The similarity to Halévy was pointed out by Ellen Landau, and is reported in Bradley Bailey, Duchamp’s Chess Identity, doctoral dissertation, Case Western Reserve University, 2004, n28, p. 107; see also Bradley Bailey, “ Rrose of Washington Square: Marcel Duchamp, Fanny Brice, and the Jewish Origins of Rrose Sélavy ,” *Source* XXVII, no. 1 (Fall 2007), p. 41.

3 As suggested by Rhonda Roland Shearer in Bonnie Jean Garner,
“Duchamp Bottles Belle Greene: Just Desserts for his Canning,” Tout-Fait, issue 2 (2000): www.toutfait.com. For the double reading of the title, see also Steven Jay Gould’s contribution to this article: “From the Bitter Negro Pun to the Beautiful Breath Bottle.”

4 Cabanne, Dialogues with Duchamp, p. 65.

5 Arturo Schwarz claims that this work was “signed after 1945,” although he provides no explanation for why the signature was applied at this time (see Schwarz, The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp, 3rd revised and expanded edition [New York: Delano Greenidge, 1997], vol. II, cat. no. 388, p. 688).

6 NOT SEEN and/or LESS SEEN of/by MARCEL DUCHAMP/RROSE SELAVY 1904-64, Cordier & Ekstrom, Inc., New York, 14 January – 13 February 1965, cat. no. 71. At the time of this show, Yvonne Crotti was living in London (her last name changed by married to Lyon), and it was probably through Duchamp’s assistance that the work was sold (at the time, Arne Ekstrom, proprietor of the gallery, was actively acquiring works by Duchamp for the Mary Sisler Collection). The 1930 show that included his Belle Haleine / Eau de Violette was Exposition de Collages, organized by Louis Aragon for the Galerie Goemans, Paris, March 1930; Duchamp was also represented by Pharmacy, an example of The Monte Carlo Bond, and two versions of the L.H.O.O.Q. (see Jennifer Gough-Cooper and Jacques Caumont, “Ephemerides on and about Marcel Duchamp and Rrose Sélavy 1887-1968,” in Pontus Hulten, ed., Marcel Duchamp, exh. cat., Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 1993, entry for 02/06/1930).