Duchamp Festival at California State University, Hayward

A major exhibition of the work of MARCEL DUCHAMP “Artist of the Century” is being presented for the first time in Northern California at the center of a Duchamp Festival at California State University, Hayward. October 2001 – February 2002…

For many years Picasso and Matisse were considered the most influential artists of the 20th century. That evaluation has changed. Now, Marcel Duchamp is widely considered the most influential artist of the 20th century.

How he came to occupy this position is a long rich story much of which will be “told” in the CSUH Art Gallery and celebrated around the campus in the CSUH Duchamp Festival.

1) THE MAN & HIS ART

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Photograph of Duchamp sitting in front
of a chess set designed by Max Ernst, 1968

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According to Lanier Graham, the Gallery's Director, "Duchamp is often thought of as the 'Daddy of Dada,' as it developed during World War I, and as the 'Grandpa of Pop', as Pop Art developed during the 1950s & '60s, as well as the 'Conceiver of Conceptual Art.' But he was a great deal more. With remarkable spontaneity and seemingly effortless ease, he put forth a lifelong series of revolutionary objects and attitudes including a remarkable nonattachment to fame or fortune. His modesty astonished everyone who knew him, while his fertile ideas inspired millions of artists. Duchamp's influence, which started during the period of Dada & Surrealism, continued to grow during the Abstract Expressionist era of Pollock and de Kooning and the Neo-Dada era of Johns and Rauschenberg. His influence continues to expand in the ever widening waves of Postmodernism today.

"He gave new status to artists by saying art is whatever the artist says is art, not what critics say art is. Many critics still hate him for that. In a world that had come to rely too much on reason, he emphasized the intuitive side of our brain by his explorations of chance and open-endedness, an open-endedness that said the viewer is the co-creator of every work of art. In short, he democratized art in a new way.

"Duchamp also was fascinated by science, especially electromagnetism. What electromagnetic energy is, and how it moves through our bodies and throughout the universe as a whole, occupied much of his thinking. Any number of his works bring together left-brain science with right-brain visualizations. In his famous work, "The Large Glass," the Bride and the Bachelors are divided and never touch, yet they are connected by "wireless" energy. He later used telephone lines to symbolize this flowing of love-energy back and forth, and reminded us that people, not communication systems, are the real 'media.'

“He grew tired of art that appeals only to the eye, and worked to elevate contemporary art above the merely visual and physical to the level of the metaphysical. His philosophical statements are among the most profound in the history of art.

“By using a good many words with his images, and by leaving meanings open-ended, he required that we think and feel at the same time. There was method to his madness. He based much of his work on the metaphysical ideal of Androgyny (true male-female balance) both in psychology and sociology. That earned him the rare respect of feminist art historians. Bringing together within ourselves the so-called ‘male’ capacity to be rational and the so-called ‘female’ capacity to be intuitive is the perennial goal of the great Wisdom Paths: Shamanism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. This dynamic harmony is said to be the key to Enlightenment.

“Enlightenment became the supreme goal of Modern artists in their non-religious quest for wholeness, their secular search for the sacred. However, few were able to attain this ideal. Various kinds of self-centeredness got in the way. Duchamp was not without shortcomings and may not have attained total selflessness, but he seems to have come closer than most.

“In place of the usual (and often egocentric) insistence on self-expression, Duchamp pointed out that self-centeredness can be removed from the artistic process. In his ‘ready-mades’ (anonymous manufactured objects he selected and signed), he generated the idea of art-without-artists, and thus opened even further the opportunity for image-making to everyone. Selecting, he said, is a creative act. Moreover, by often replicating his earlier works, the concept of self moved even further away from the object and opened out toward the not-self. The unification of self and not-self is the ultimate aim of traditional metaphysical philosophy.

“However, he never lost respect for well-crafted quality. His every object was made with loving care, as were his

relationships with others. Duchamp celebrated human nature in general and the erotic impulse in particular, advising above all loving and being loved. He also thought of the connection between art and life as a kind of oneness. And all along the way, he recommended laughter."

2) THE FESTIVAL

The CSUH Duchamp Festival, based on California collections and California scholarship, will include a wide variety of experiences that reflect the many sides of Duchamp. In the University Art Gallery, "Marcel Duchamp & The Art of Life" will be a concise but comprehensive selection of his visual work on loan from major California museums such as the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, as well as from private collectors in the San Francisco Bay Area.

This is the first large-scale Duchamp exhibition in Northern California, and the most comprehensive Duchamp exhibition in California since his first museum retrospective in Pasadena in 1963.

The University Art Gallery also has organized a Symposium featuring recent Duchamp research by scholars from the San Francisco Bay Area. Included will be Wanda Corn, Professor of Art History at Stanford University, speaking on "Duchamp & Early American Modernism"; James Housefield, formerly of CSUH and now at Southwest Texas State University, speaking on "Duchamp & Leonardo da Vinci"; and Lanier Graham, Director of the University Art Gallery at CSUH, speaking on "Duchamp & Androgyny," a paper that will include parts of Graham's conversations with Duchamp when they played chess together in the 1960s.

The exhibition catalogue is being edited by Lanier Graham. Graham is well known in Duchamp circles for his book CHESS SETS (1968), which was assisted by Duchamp and dedicated to

Duchamp, and for “IMPOSSIBLE REALITIES: MARCEL DUCHAMP & THE SURREALIST TRADITION” – the exhibition Graham curated at the Norton Simon Museum of Art in 1991.

Plays, dances, and music were important to Duchamp, from his earliest years to his later years when he was involved with John Cage (who was strongly influenced by Duchamp’s work), and Merce Cunningham whose dancers have often danced around inflatable Duchampian objects which were designed by Jasper Johns after Duchamp’s “Large Glass.”

In celebration of these aspects of Duchamp’s spirit, the CSUH Department of Theater & Dance is performing one of Duchamp’s favorite plays, UBU ROI, directed by Ric Prindle, and presenting a new Duchampian dance on the theme of chess, under the supervision of Laura Renaud-Wilson, who studied with Cunningham. CSUH musicians, under the supervision of the avant-garde composer Scot Gresham-Lancaster, are planning to present ‘music’ by Duchamp, and compositions by John Cage.

Duchamp authorities from coast to coast are praising the concept and content of the Festival, both for its breadth and its depth. Among those who are looking forward to the Festival and have contributed to helpful information are Bonnie Clearwater, of Miami Beach, editor of West Coast Duchamp, Linda D. Henderson of the University of Texas at Austin, author of Duchamp in Context: Science and Technology in the Large Glass and Related Works, Francis M. Naumann of New York, author of Marel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, Moira Roth of Mills College in Oakland,author of Difference / Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, Naomi Sawelson-Gorse of Claremont, editor of Women in DADA, and Michael Taylor, Curator of Modern & Contemporary Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, who is responsible for the most important Duchamp collection in the world.

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