Duchamp’s Gendered Plumbing: A Family Business?

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Figure 1
Marcel Duchamp,
Fountain,
photograph by Alfred
Stieglitz from
The Blind Man
No. 2, 1917

When Duchamp in 1917 labeled a urinal an art work, a sculpture (Fig. 1), he raised questions that have engaged generations of critics, and the work continues to inspire artists.[1] Its designation as a fountain raises other questions; e.g., how could a piece of plumbing, a receptacle for standup male excretion, serve as a fountain that sprinkles water? The association of the “fountain” with the male organ makes some sense; but the recent view of critics that its round compact shape suggests female qualities compounds the paradox of reception/projection of fluid: did Duchamp conceive an incongruous representation in which a female’s anatomy, designed for a vertical drop, serves the function of horizontally directed discharge like the male’s? and was this conception unique, unprecedented?

The answers I propose are yes to his conception and no to its uniqueness.

In an irony that has not escaped his critics, the
Fountain
(or its replicas) and all the other ready-mades of Duchamp, which he considered anaesthetic and antiretinal, remain on public view in museums as centers of attention and discourse, ccupying aesthetic space rather like the unrestored marks of an iconoclast or like the cracks in his definitively unfinished
Large Glass
. (Fig. 2) Their status grows in prominence among some critics even as other contemporary manifestations-for example by the Dadaists-fade into obscurity or a scholarly twilight zone.

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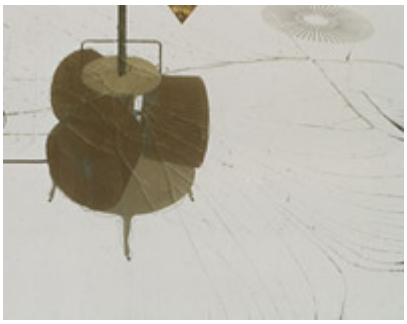


Figure 2
Marcel Duchamp,
Close-up view of the
Large Glass
showing the crack

No work seems more understated and prosaically obvious than the Fountain, generally presented as a protest against the institution of gallery and museum exhibition. Yet this popular object continues to generate a big literature dedicated to the insatiable interpretation of its hidden implications. A recent theory claims that the work presented by Duchamp as a sample of prosaic American plumbing was not simply ready-made but

artfully altered, confected to seem readymade: ars celare artem. This view has inspired erudite research among the manufacturers's toilets and led some to conclude that Duchamp simulated the standardization.[2] This corroborates the view that at least some of the "mades" were not all "ready-" and merely selected, but evolved over time and with premeditation, a point that emerges also in the following discussion of the Fountain.

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Figure 3
Marcel Duchamp,
Bottle Dryer,
1914/64

Duchamp's toilet sculpture makes an exquisitely ironic comment on the view circulating in France since the nineteenth century that advocates of utility-whether in philosophy, art or plumbing-were tasteless. (The epitome of industrial utility were of course the Anglo-Saxons, particularly the Americans.) As the champion of l'art pour l'art Théophile Gautier asserted in 1834, "There is nothing really beautiful save what is of no possible use. Everything useful is ugly, for it expresses a need, and man's needs are low and disgusting, like his own poor, wretched nature. The most useful place in a house is the water closet. / For my part … I am fond of things and people

in inverse ratio to the service they render me. I prefer a Chinese vase with its mandarins and dragons, which is perfectly useless to me, to a utensil which I do use…”[3] It was with this aesthetics of tastelessness in mind that Duchamp the socioaesthetic gadfly wryly remarked (1946), “I threw the bottle rack (Fig. 3) and the urinal into their faces as a challenge, and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty.”[4]

As noted above, the upright urinals were designed to receive and remove a standing man’s urination, his jet d’eau (“fountain”); in contrast the female’s downward stream favor(ing)s squatting.

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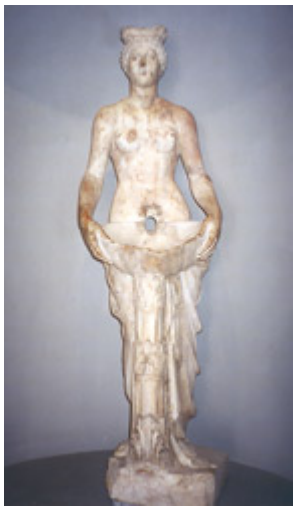


Figure 4
Mannekin-pis fountain, Brussels
Figure 5
Hellenistic marble
Fountain Nymph of
the second century A.D

This property yielded the convenience denied women of the stand-up pissoirs once common on public streets in France.[5] (Fig. 4) A German feminist, concerned about the gendered function of the urinal, argued that the Fountain has an

exclusionary significance for Frenchmen: its awkwardness for women embodies in her view an implicit sexism.[6]

Yet the Greeks already conceived of a fountain in which the water gushed from a standing female. The plumbing built into a Hellenistic marble Fountain Nymph of the second century A.D. allowed a strong, horizontally-directed flow of water, projecting a stream identical to that from the male organ. In this rare construction a round vaginal channel passes through the pelvis of the standing figure. The water moved through that passage toward a facing water basin, filling and overflowing it.[7] (Fig. 5) I don't know whether Duchamp saw a version of this fountain in Paris or Munich, but the idea of adapting replicas of classical statues to contemporary household fixtures was quite common. In this increasingly commercial consumer society even hallowed works like the Venus de Milo could be subjected to caricature: the Vénus de Mille-eaux of 1896 resembles a kiosk plastered with stickers advertising-not fountains, but popular watering places. Thus, engaging the vast upsurge of middle class tourists seeking culture, humorists in anticipation of Duchamp's Fountain, made sport of bringing dignified classics down to a plebeian level.

click image to enlarge



Figure 6
Jean Arp, Portrait of
Tristan Tzara.1916.
Estate of the
artist: on loan to

the Musee d’Art
et d’Histoire, Geneva.



Figure 7
Brancusi,Portrait of
Princess X, 1916

Duchamp generated something more than the ironic display of a provocatively vulgar and sexist object, and his piece bears comparison with some sculptures by his contemporaries. Duchamp in fact emphasized that in choosing an ordinary article of life, and causing its useful significance to disappear under the new title and point of view, he “created a new thought for that object.” The new thought in this protoconceptual piece involved, as we have seen, complicating the gender question by truncating the projecting tubes of the male utensil and rotating its axis. The compact form he devised emphasizes curvilinear lines, like the mechanomorphic female nudes of his friend Picabia; and it also suggests the r(R)eliefs Jean Arp made between 1916 and 1922,(Fig. 6) which Duchamp admired as among the most convincing sculptures of that “antirationalist era,” adding that “his Concretions are like a three-dimensional pun on the female body.”[8] More directly relevant to the Fountain’s implied androgyny is a sculpture exhibited in 1917 in the same Independents exhibition that refused the Fountain-Brancusi’s Portrait of Princess X of 1916, (Fig. 7) notorious for uniting in one piece phallic and female aspects.[9]

A subtle-or controversial-source for the Fountain arguably comes from the collages of Picasso and Braque. When Duchamp rejected Cubist painting-notably the variant practiced by his brothers and their friends at the Section d'Or-he turned to selecting and modifying objects available for purchase. This move to readymades was inspired I believe by the example of Cubist collage, admittedly as an intellectual response to its concept. He made ironic comments or exaggerations of the formal or verbal games of Picasso and Braque, who for example suggested making a "urinal" from a "(jo)ur(i)nal" and-anticipating his play on Q in LHOOQ-insinuated a playful androgyny in the letter Q (a hole with a cedilla) and in the hollow frontal tubes of pipes (derived from the famous Grebo mask's eyes?).[10] In contrast to the artistic finesse of these androgynous tubes, the frontal hole of Duchamp's Fountain -at once a truncated penis and a protruding vagina-seems like an artless display of plumbing.

By displaying this utensil upside down-inverting it-Duchamp slyly enhanced the uncertainty of the object's gender, intimating its androgyny.[11] Aas in note 13 described the Fountain as a receptacle for the male "jet" turned upside-down and made female, a vagina potentially containing its own fluids. This inversion that accentuates the feminine lines of a utensil intended for males, provides one more example of the theme of androgyny so often noted in Duchamp's work.[12]

The Fountain provided Duchamp with a field suited to his prankish humor about his own gender identity. One of the most important books on the Fountain opens with the remark, "We do not even know with absolute certainty that Duchamp was the artist-he himself once attributed it to a female friend …"[13] The confusion of authorship and gender culminated a few years later in his female persona Rrose Sélavy, a playful transformation of his sex, name and religion; but he may have adumbrated the Fountain's link of female to male (urinal)

earlier in his notes of 1914 for the *Large Glass*. In one of them he says that “one only has: for female the public urinal and one lives by it.”[14] It seems to me that “one lives” anticipates the name Rrose Sélavy (arrose, c’est la vie).[15] A drawing for the *Large Glass* traces a parabolic trajectory of water spurting like urinary discharge. The text next to it curiously associates fountain (jet d’eau) or water spray and a subtle confusion of genders: “MOULIN A EAU / Chute d’eau / Une sorte de jet d’eau arrivant de loin en demi-cercle-par-dessus les moules malic.”[16] The word moules embodies androgynous meaning: on the one hand it is defined as male by the adjective malic as the mold for the bachelors; on the other hand a second definition of moule means mussel, which served as a metaphor in Parisian modernist circles to signify the vulve.[17]

click image to enlarge



Figure 8
Marcel Duchamp,
Family Portrait (1899),1964
Rhonda Roland Shearer COLLECTION

Can Duchamp’s archly subversive efforts to bring together the genders have covered a personal agenda? Perhaps his endless fascination with the coincidentia oppositorum evidenced in the Fountain’s implicit androgyny can provide a brief glimpse beneath his otherwise impersonal facade. I am by no means alone in elevating Duchamp above the impersonal collectivity

of the Dadaist movement.[18] In 1964 Duchamp exhibited a photo of his family cut to fit into a replica of the Fountain , a devoutly irreverent monument perhaps prompted by the death of his brother Jacques Villon the year before.(Fig. 8) This is a photomontage composed of photos from 1899 showing the 12 year old Marcel in the center beneath his mother holding a baby and above his father and two sisters. An inked out form between the sisters might have been a photo of his deceased brother Jacques. He had often over the course of his career created figure groups directly or indirectly suggesting family pictures: his brothers playing chess; the King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes ; and the Big Glass with its cloud "parents" above and "bachelors" below.[19]

Family photo in a urinal. Androgyny. Pseudonymous roles-male and female. All this would seem to invite psychological analysis; but the personality of this wily chess master, a connoisseur of stalemates, has discouraged analyses of his motivations. We may note, it is true, that the jarring discord between a family photo and its unseemly location recalls a description of the Freudian family scene in which all differences-gender, age, love and hate, the oedipal triangle-merge in incestuous union;[20] moreover, that as Rrose Sélavy Duchamp once equated incest and a "passion de famille." However, the approach of Adlerian Individual psychology may offer a more direct access to his intentions. Such an approach would interpret his behavior as largely a reflex of his place in the family constellation-a middle child between siblings of opposite gender.

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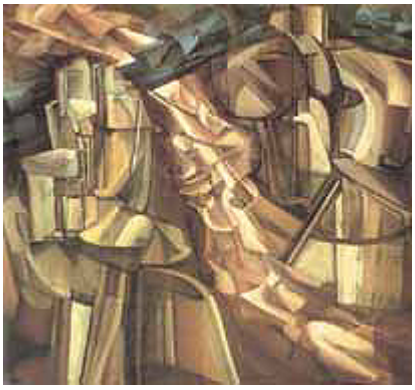


Figure 9
Marcel Duchamp,Portrait of
the Artist’s Father, 1910
Figure 10
Marcel Duchamp, The King and Queen
Surrounded by Swift Nudes, 1912

Marcel was the youngest of the three artist sons of Eugène Duchamp, a well-to-do notary, and experienced an apparently normal and happy childhood in an affectionate family milieu. His father tolerated and even supported financially the artistic ambitions of his sons. In 1910 Duchamp painted a loving Cézannesque portrait of his seated father with a large urn over his left shoulder.(Fig. 9) Rather than engaging in a simple Oedipal revolt against the father’s prosaic job as notary, he entered into a complex dialectic with him. His older siblings already broke with the bourgeois profession of his father, and Duchamp like them rebelled professionally (a position epitomized, perhaps in The King nd Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes
of 1913 (Fig. 10)). As the most rebellious sibling and the last-born male Duchamp invites the Adlerian thesis that personality is determined by birth order of children within a family.[21]Duchamp’s case is rather complex since as last of three males in a family of six children he was at once last born and middle child. Adlerian Individual Psychology says of the middle child,[22]especially the male, that he will sometimes become a rebel, either covertly or overtly, but that if not encouraged he could drop out of competition and become an

observer. Forced to be self-sufficient he will seek out an independent path. While defying authority figures, he can keep a lower profile or stay out of the limelight.[23]

In seeking out an independent place for himself Duchamp implicitly rebelled against his brothers' authority, rejecting their use of traditional materials and techniques in favor of technology and commercial materials. He mimicked his brothers' interest in science especially optics, transmogrified into a mocking pataphysics, an unstable mixture of Jarry and Leonardo.[24] In the end he assimilated the logic and scrupulous attention to detail of his father the notary while rejecting the life style of the staid bourgeois: he carefully filled notebooks (for the Large Glass) with systematic calculations so obscurely self-referential that many are incomprehensible. In doing so he created an onanistic Summa filled with overt and covert sexual annotations: the art of the notary turned into a notarial art.

All this certainly describes the famous anonymous author of R. Mutt's Fountain, an artist who celebrated and profaned his family by placing their image at the bottom of a urinal (illustrating his famous word play "Ruiner – Uriner"), just as he may have soiled and celebrated the ghosts of millenial sculpture.

Notes

1. To take one example: Mike Bidlo in 1995 titled a version of Fountain Origins of the World (an allusion to the title of Courbet's painting of female pudenda). Recalling Stieglitz's famous photo of the Fountain before a painting by Marsden Hartley, he placed behind it a copy of a painting of a flower

with vaginal suggestions by Georgia O'Keeffe. Interestingly O'Keeffe's flower is a rose whose color is visible through the holes of the fountain—doubtless an allusion to Duchamp's alter ego Rrose! Bidlo produced more than 3,000 variations on the "Fountain" motif. On these and other relevant issues see the valuable article by Michael R. Taylor, "Blind Man's Buff: Duchamp, Stieglitz, and the Fountain Scandal Revisited," in the exhibition catalogue Mirrorical Returns. Marcel Duchamp and the [sic] 20th Century Art (Yokohama Museum of Art, 2005) 206-13. Footnote Return

2. Rhonda Roland Shearer has spearheaded this new view of the readmades. Working with her husband the late Stephen Jay Gould, she has investigated Duchamp's sources for the Fountain and for Apolinère Enameled in "Marcel Duchamp: A readymade case for collecting objects of our cultural heritage along with works of art," in Tout-Fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal, 1: 3 (Dec. 2000): Collections. William A. Camfield held to the established opinion when he drew attention to Duchamp's selection of a urinal from the J. L. Mott Iron Works in "Marcel Duchamp's Fountain: Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917," in Rudolf E. Kuenzli and Francis M. Naumann, Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989) 64-94. In fact, the first version of the work, refused for the exhibition, has long ceased to exist except as replicas, a photo by Stieglitz, and numerous texts starting with Duchamp's letters and notes and extending through an interminable series of commentaries and critical footnotes, including this one. Footnote Return

3. See Gautier's preface to Mlle. de Maupin. Footnote Return

4. The journalist Louise Norton wrote an early critical examination of the Fountain's aesthetic properties titled "Buddha of the Bathroom" that appeared in the second issue of

The Blind Man. (Fig. 11) Duchamp rejoined her piece with a letter to Rongwrong (Fig. 12) on May 5, 1917 calling her sarcastically an “exquise psychologue” who “à propos de pissotières, invoque d’une façon si éclectique Montaigne, Nietzsche et Rémy de Gourmont.” Footnote Return

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Figure 11
The Blind Man
, vol. 2, 1917


THE BLIND MAN

The Richard Mutt Case

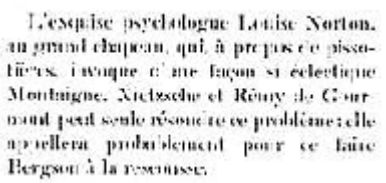

L'exquise psychologue Louise Norton, au grand chapeau, qui, à propos de pissotières, invoque d'une façon si éclectique Montaigne, Nietzsche et Rémy de Gourmont peut seule résoudre ce problème; elle appellera probablement pour ce faire Bergson à la rescousse.

Figure 12
Marcel Duchamp, letter to
RongWrong

, 1917

5. The Robert Dictionnaire historique, assuming the pissotière was designed for men, defines it in terms of the membre viril and urine. A French colloquialism describes the urination of boys as occurring while standing. See Michel Maillard, "'Un zizi, ça sert à faire pipi debout! Les références génériques de ça en grammaire francaise,' in Recherches linguistiques 12: 157-207 (1987). The projective aspect of the standing male urinator is well represented by the penis faucet of the famous Mannekin-pis fountain in Brussels. Footnote Return

6. See Uli Schuster, "Was macht ein Werk zum Kunstwerk? Betrachtungen zu einem Objekt von Marcel Duchamp: Fountain." It is interesting to note the remarks of the famous Freudian analyst Marie Bonaparte as presented by N. Thompson, "Marie Bonaparte's Theory of Female Sexuality," in American Imago 60:3 (Fall 2003): 239, "An additional theme in Bonaparte's characterization is her grandmother's alleged virility. Justine Eléonore reinforced the impression that she was a 'phallic woman' by boasting that she could urinate while standing up, a claim that astonished her granddaughter." Footnote Return

7. The statue, recently excavated, is exhibited at the Pergamum Museum under nr.768. Footnote Return

8. Duchamp wrote this retrospectively in 1949. Footnote Return

9. Can an association between Brancusi's androgynous figure and Duchamp's androgynous urinal account for one artist's idea of turning Brancusi's into toilets? In the 1990's Tim Thyzel exhibited in the Cynthia Broan Gallery in N.Y.C. an ensemble of "Bathroom Brancusis"; and—echoing Brancusi's formal vocabulary—starting in 1993 he even fashioned an "Endless

Column” of toilet bowls. Doïna Lemny, Edith Balas and William Camfield explore Duchamp’s relation to Brancusi in Marielle Tabart, editor, Brancusi-Duchamp, in the collection “Les Carnets de l’Atelier Brancusi” Paris, 2000. Recent scholarship has explored Brancusi’s androgyny and ambiguity: Bernard Marcadé in Femininmasculin: Le sexe de l’art, exh. cat., Centre G. Pompidou, Paris 1995, p. 31, quoted an interview of Brancusi with Robert Devigne originally published in L’ère nouvelle, ‘Le devenir-femme de l’art,’ Jan. 28, 1920. On Brancusi’s use of ambiguity, see Friedrich Teja Bach, Constantin Brancusi, Metamorphosen plastischer Form (Cologne 1987) 184-7. Footnote Return

10. See also my article “A Symbolist Antecedent of the Androgynous Q in Duchamp’s L.H.O.O.Q.,” in Source XVIII.4 (Summer, 1999): 40-7. Footnote Return

11. In an article in a respected German medical journal, Karl Westphal in 1869 introduced a new mental disorder he called “Contrary Sexual Feeling.” According to Westphal, male inverts exhibit obvious signs of effeminacy and experience sexual desire directed toward their own sex. Similarly, female inverts, including a case he reported on, are tomboys who turn away from “normal” sexual contacts with men, favoring other women instead. Westphal’s successor Richard von Krafft-Ebing viewed sexual inversion as a mental disease, and popularized the notion that male inverts are profoundly feminine and delicate. Havelock Ellis rejected the idea that male inverts are necessarily girlish, but retained the term in his book Sexual Inversion (1896). Footnote Return

12. Lanier Graham, “Duchamp and Androgyny: The Concept and its Context,” Tout-Fait 2:4 (Jan. 2002), Articles. The link between androgyny and the coincidentia oppositorum has led some to speculate about Duchamp’s interest in alchemy. See,

for example, Arturo Schwarz, “The Alchemist Stripped Bare in the Bachelor, Even,” in Anne d’Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, Marcel Duchamp (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1973). Footnote Return

13. See William A. Camfield, Marcel Duchamp: Fountain (Houston: The Menil Collection, 1989). Footnote Return .

14. See Duchamp, Box in Sanouillet and Peterson, The Writings of Marcel Duchamp (1973) 23. Footnote Return

15. Perhaps Duchamp had in mind Lumière’s celebrated slapstick film of 1905 L’arroseur arrosé (the sprinkler sprinkled) in which a man watering his lawn lets slip his garden hose which splashes water all over him-“that’s life.” The children’s journal, Musée des enfants in 1897, p.96 contains “sprinkling” cartoons; e.g. one captioned “Il est là, Monsieur” in which a worker hosing the street points the way to a well-dressed gentleman, and inadvertently directs the hose at the shocked, recoiling figure. Footnote Return

16. See Duchamp du Signe, p.89. Duchamp sustained his fascination with fluids over the next decades right to his death; e.g., in the 50 cc. of Paris Air, (Fig. 13) in the Eau de voilette,(Fig. 14) and in the late waterfall of Etant donnés. (Fig. 15) Footnote Return

click images to enlarge



Figure 13
Marcel Duchamp,
50 cc.
of Paris Air
, 1919



Figure 14
Marcel Duchamp,Belle
Haleine: Eau de Voilette, 1921



Figure 15
Marcel Duchamp,
Etant donnés: 1° la chute d’eau / 2° le gaz d’éclairage
[Given: 1. The Waterfall /

2. The Illuminating Gas], 1946-66

17. Mussels first entered French dining in the late 19th century, and Apollinaire already compared it to the vulva in Les Exploits d'un jeune Don Juan (1907) 31): "A la fin je découvris que [la] fente [de Berthe] que l'on pouvait comparer à une moule entr'ouverte …" Footnote Return

18. See Camfield, op.cit., and Marjorie Perloff, Dada without Duchamp / Duchamp without Dada: Avant-garde Tradition and the Individual Talent,1998 Footnote Return

19. Duchamp's efforts to control his siblings and his continual assigning them nicknames suggest a remark made by Robert Smithson in an interview shortly before his death. Smithson observed somewhat caustically the growing influence of Duchamp whom he described as "a kind of priest … who turned a urinal into a baptismal font." In Moira Roth, "Robert Smithson on Duchamp, an Interview," Artforum XII.2 (Oct. 1973): 47, reprinted in J. Maschek, ed., Duchamp in Perspective (NJ, 1975) 134-7. Footnote Return

20. See Guy Rosolato, Essais sur le symbolique (1969) 291: "Le mythe serait … dans la nostalgie idéalisée d'une unité originelle qu'entretient le fantasme infantile de la Scène Primitive." Footnote Return

21. Frank J. Sulloway, Born to Rebel. Birth Order, Family Dynamics and Creative Lives (New York: Random House, 1996) follows Adler in his essential thesis. But he adds a statistical veneer and uses (without citing) Popper's once fashionable "principle of falsifiability" to refute Adler's lack of scientific rigor. Footnote Return

22. The complexity of his emotional and artistic relations to his next younger sibling Suzanne have yet to be explored. Replacing him as youngest child she may well have dealt a mildly traumatic blow to his ego. Can his envy of her have contributed to his wish as Rrose to rival females in general, to adopt their look while retaining his male prerogatives? Footnote Return

23. Duchamp advances a concept of “sister squares” in his book on chess theory. Footnote Return

24. Linda Dalrymple Henderson has written extensively on Duchamp’s interest in contemporary science. Footnote Return

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