

Elena del Rivero and Marcel Duchamp: Les Amoureuses

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Figure 1
Elena del Rivero,
Les Amoureuses: Elena & Rrrose
2001 (Photo: Kyle Brooks;
© Photo 1963:
Julian Wasser. All rights reserved)

In the end, West Coast photographer Julian Wasser gave in to her gentle pleading and allowed New York-based artist Elena del Rivero to use his famous photograph of Marcel Duchamp, depicting the artist at the opening of his first major solo-show at the Pasadena Museum of Art in 1963, playing chess with a nude Eve Babitz . The result of del Rivero's appropriation is a Duraflex C-type print of 30 x 36 inches titled "Les Amoureuses, Elena & Rrrose" (2001) (Fig. 1). The artist, seated in front of a collage of a photocopied and enlarged version of Wasser's original, seems to be seated opposite Duchamp, almost entirely covering the body of the nude appearing behind her on the picture. The artist, wearing a long, pleated dress of golden color (Elena del Rivero: "I wanted to be a princess!") is stringing up pearls of which a rather arge amount is gathered in her lap. Concentrated as she is in her work, the artist takes on the pose of a seamstress passing time through monotonous, almost meditative work – a theme often explored

throughout del Rivero's oeuvre.

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Figure 2
Elena del Rivero,
Las Hilanderas
(*The Spinners*), 2001
(Photo: Kyle Brooks;
© Photo 1963: Julian Wasser.
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Figure 3
Diego Velázquez,
The Spinners, c. 1657

Between July 11–28, 2001, del Rivero concurrently presented the installation [*Swi:t*] *Home* at The Drawing Center's Drawing Room in New York, and *Las Hilanderas* (*The Spinners*) (Fig. 2) at the Dieu Donné Papermill (DDP) just around the corner. As Mina Takahashi, the executive director of DDP wrote in an accompanying foldout, [*Swi:t*] *Home* tracked the daily life in del Rivero's home/studio ⁽¹⁾

"by registering movement and activities on large sheets of paper which she placed on the floor throughout her space [...] The 60 x 40-inch handmade abaca sheets were fabricated at Dieu

Donné with a watermark bearing Elena's full name in a circular logo." For *Las Hilanderas (The Spinners)*, del Rivero, employing the age-old technique of paper-thread making, explores through a tableaux vivant of Velázquez' well-known painting of the same name (ca. 1657) (Fig.3) Ovid's myth of Arachne and the goddess Athena. The young Lydian girl Arachne dared to challenge Pallas Athena to a contest to see who could weave the most brilliant tapestry. After several days, Athena finished first. Hers was a brilliant tapestry depicting the gods and goddesses of Olympus. At each corner of Athena's design she illustrated the punishments given to mortals who attempted to defy the Olympians. Arachne, however,rafted her tapestry as a retort to Athena's. It was a magnificent portrayal of of the higher reality as well. But on her tapestry Arachne wove into the design a scandalous story of the love affairs between the gods and mortal women, revealing the gods' more human-like faults. This insult angered Athena and she lashed out at the girl in rage. Arachne, hurt and broken, opted for suicide over the torments of Athena and desperately tried to hang herself. But feeling guilty at the suffering she caused the poor girl, Athena changed Arachne into a spider, just moments before her suicide was accomplished. Arachne,transfigured as a spider, never moved, but forever dangled on one thin string from her web.

In her artist's statement for *[Swi:t] Home* and *Las Hilanderas (The Spinners)* Elena del Rivero describes her work thus:

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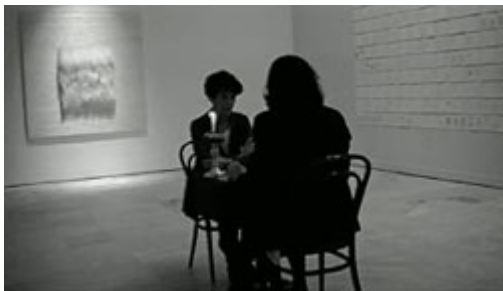
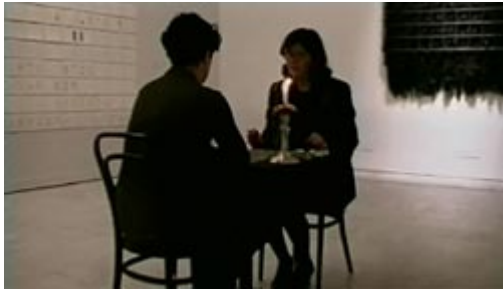


Figure 4
Titian, *The Rape
of Europa*, 1562

“Like all the best discoveries, transforming the leftover paper from *[Swi:t] Home* was a chance event. The ‘spinning’ of thread has allowed me to establish relationships with other female artists who have collaborated with me on this project. From the moment that I called my first collaborator a spinner, the die was cast: *Las Hilanderas (The Spinners)* by Velázquez started to wriggle in my head. I remembered my visits to the Museo del Prado to investigate all the meanings attached to the master’s brushstrokes. I know that my interpretation differs from that of the great scholars: to me, the oldest woman in the group is Arachne. It may also be unorthodox to refer to Duchamp in relation to the tapestry representing Titian’s *Rape of Europa* (Fig. 4) in Velázquez’s painting. I am not measuring myself against Duchamp; I am simply outlining a possible dialogue through difference, one that, I think, Luce Irigaray might approve of. More important is the fact that I have been able to invite my mother to ‘spin.’ The thread has been an excuse to engage in talking again about how time goes by.”

And finally, the following is an excerpt of Rita Gonzales’ essay “How to Feed and Sustain a Fragment,” published in the 64pp. catalogue *At the Curve of the World* (Santa Monica: Smart Art Press, 1999) that accompanied the group show of the same name which took place at Track 16 Gallery, Santa Monica, September 11–November 6, 1999.

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& video artist Nacho Perez.
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Figures 5-9
Elena del Rivero,
still images from *A Reading*, 1998



Figure 10
 Elena del Rivero, *Opening Tom Patchett*, 1999
 (Photo: Kyle Brooks)

To the show featuring works by woman artists Mariana Botey, E.V. Day and Diana Lopez, among others, Elena del Rivero contributed *Echo of an Unfinished Letter*, an intricate and layered record of the passage of time that takes the form of six hundred pages of musical notation paper imprinted with sound waves (the “echo”) produced by passing a needle and thread through paper. Visually stunning, *Echo* speaks – through its formal, emotional and performative power – of the hidden, devotional aspect of longing and creation.

The accompanying pictures (Figs. 5-9) are film stills from *A Reading*, showing Elena del Rivero with her Tarot teacher, a performance that took place during her *Unfinished Letter* exhibition at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, 1998. The last photo showing del Rivero with Man Ray’s chess board is called “Opening Tom Patchett” (Fig. 10). She explains [in an e-mail to *Tout-Fait* of 13 August 2001: “He is a collector from LA and I was having a show at his space Track 16 [see above] and stayed at his place. Going into his bedroom I saw the chessboard by Man Ray in the edition of 1943.

Rita Gonzales writes:

“Elena del Rivero’s work seeks correspondence with an

invisible audience sometimes figured as an absent mother, lover, or friend, and in the case of her recent video installation *A Reading* with the infamous image of Marcel Duchamp playing chess with a young nude woman. According to accounts in Bonnie Clearwater's *West Coast Duchamp* ⁽²⁾, no individual party (including Duchamp himself) took credit for the staging of this event at his Pasadena Art Museum retrospective exhibition in 1963. Dickran Tashjian has revealed that the woman in question, Eve Babitz, was in fact the granddaughter of modernist composer Igor Stravinsky. Tashjian intuitively feels that her naked presence may have brought to Duchamp's mind (among other things) a historical moment of rupture at which he was present—the first performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* before a decidedly disturbed audience. Unlike del Rivero, critics of Duchamp have tended to shy away from this image, perhaps imagining that the event was a cheap publicity ploy (even though Duchamp himself held a strong fondness for it).

In her discussion of the 'en-gendering' of Duchamp's work, art historian Amelia Jones represents the Pasadena chess game as a moment of frustration for those who believe they know everything about Duchamp. In this closed circuit of frustrated narrative and through other moments in his public address and writings, Jones finds *her* Duchamp articulated through his contradictions and discursive elisions.

He is not 'simply' modern or postmodern, authoritative or anti-authoritative, regressive or progressive, masculine (virile, original subject) or feminine (seductive object), heterosexual (paternal and generative) or homosexual (coquettish camp idol), but particularly illustrates the contingency of each of these terms on its supposed opposite. ⁽³⁾

"These contingencies are perhaps what drew del Rivero to the infamous image of seduction and sublimation. She, like Jones, searches for a throughway to access the document and to play

out her own critique of the en-gendering of art production. While in Spain for art exhibition of her massive series *Unfinished Letter* (1998), del Rivero staged a private performance, the end result of which was *A reading* (1998):

'I asked the museum director [at the Reina Sofia in Madrid] if I could have the rooms closed for two hours. I had previously asked my tarot reader, whom I had not seen for seven years, if she could come to the Reina, read the tarot for me there, and be recorded. She accepted. I had two camera-people ready on that day, a candle, and a glass ball. The cameramen thought it looked OK. I had fetched a small table and two simple chairs. They were placed in the middle of the room, very much after the Duchamp photo. The séance started. It was recorded in actual time. It lasted thirty-four minutes....' ⁽⁴⁾

"The final edited version of the video intermixes elements from an audio art piece entitled *String Quartet* (1998-99), the sound of which was captured during the embroidery of the six hundred sheets that make up del Rivero's series *Unfinished Letter*. As *String Quartet* blurs and obscures the revelations of that tarot reader, the enigmas of the artist are preserved, echoing with humor the staging of the Duchamp photograph. It is the very difference between tarot and the chess game that del Rivero uses to address the contradictions in the philosophies and oeuvre of Duchamp and their subsequent effect on the readings and inscriptions of his work. *A Reading* draws on the ambiguity of Duchamp's notions of art production as they shifted between 'mysticism and the games,' a phrase drawn from Duchamp's own contradictory statements about art production as being pure sensation to associating art with pure concept. 'I do believe in the mediumistic role of the artist," said Duchamp at a Philadelphia Museum College of Art panel in 1961. *A Reading* allows del Rivero to inhabit the photograph and disturb the sense of disclosure and culpability felt by those who approach both the historical document and her own serial work looking for confessions. As Maria-Josep

Balsach has so eloquently said of del Rivero's work: "Perhaps it is an inverted movement—or a projection—of what has been the innate objective of twentieth-century art: To dislodge utopia and ostentatiously occupy the essence of the confronting and self-confronting ego, arising from the most intimate, dark, abominable recesses.'⁽⁵⁾"

Notes

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1. Through the attacks of September 11, 2001, the home/studio of Elena del Rivero and her partner Kyle Brooks was destroyed. Luckily, both were unharmed. With the apartment located on Cedar Street, in the immediate vicinity of what came to be known as Ground Zero, they lost most of their work and documents.

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2. Dickran Tashjian, "Nothing Left to Chance: Duchamp's First Retrospective," in *West Coast Duchamp*, ed. Bonnie Clearwater (Miami Beach: Grassfield Press, 1993) 61-83.

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3. Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 106.

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4. "Echo of an Unfinished Letter through a Reading of Tarot," unpublished artist statement.

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5. Elena del Rivero: *Cortas* (Burgos, Spain: Espacio Caja de Burgos, 1997) 7.