Ready-Aid?: A Note on Philippe Duboy's *Lequeu: An Architectural Enigma*

Philippe Duboy, Lequeu: An Architectural Enigma,Foreword by Robin Middleton, London: Thames and Hudson, 1986, 367 pages

If the aura of the "original" in the work of art has been effectively dismissed by the techniques of modern mechanical reproduction, then we might say that that other aura (the aura of the fake, the inauthentic, the spurious) has been more effectively installed. The aura of the dupe, the stand-in, the hoax can be seen as a particularly "modern" incarnation—one directly relevant to, if not entirely generated by, Duchamp and Duchamp studies. So much of Duchamp criticism, before it can make even a single claim or observation, must contend with the possibility that it is itself being "taken," shown for a "Duchump"-Duchamp as the proto-typical postmodern trickster, but also as the academic grifter par excellence. Just what's real in the Duchamp corpus? What's the angle?

So it was, so it is!, that I really *bit* at a reference (in a non-Duchamp related text about "Eccentric Spaces") to an architecture book by contemporary French writer Philippe Duboy that concerns an 18th Century French Architect, Jean-Jacques Lequeu, and specifically the relationship between this architect and Marcel Duchamp. The reference seemed to be implying, if only tentatively, that Duchamp was Lequeu or, at the very least, was profoundly influenced by him. Amazing reference, if only because I had never come across mention of Lequeu's work before-let alone any intimation that he was a Duchamp influence (along the important lines of Raymond Roussel or Alfred Jarry) or even, maybe, a Duchamp creation.

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Img left

Jean-Jacques Lequeu, *Untitled,* 1792, in
Philippe Duboy, *Lequeu: An Architectural Enigma,*
MIT Press, 1987, p. 289

Img Right

Jean-Jacques Lequeu, The *Vile Reclining Venus,* date unknown, in Duboy, p. 299

Lequeu: An Architectural Enigma was not (I had feared as much!) available at my university library and so I made an "inter-library" request and awaited its arrival from Toronto. When Duboy's rather massive book-translated from the original French by Francis Scarfe-finally arrived, I fanned the pages and scanned for graphics. While there are only about 8 colour plates, there are over 420 stunning illustrations in the book. Under the heading "Figures lascives," for example, one encounters a range of erotic Lequeu figures: drawing of a woman, wearing what I think you'd call an erect penis necklace, masturbating with two hands; many paintings that mercurially detail male and female genitalia; and lots of cocksucking satyr stuff with saucy, suggestive inscriptions. This is just to point out that, before reading a single line of Duboy's text, Lequeu: *An Architectural Enigma* was positively radiant with "aura."

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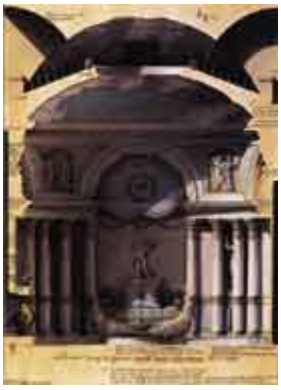

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Jean-Jacques Lequeu, *The Gate of the Hermitage; Drinking Den* of the arid wildness; *The Rendezvous of Bellevue* is on the tip of the rock, in Duboy, p.83

Img right

Jean-Jacques Lequeu,The boudoir on the ground floor, known as *the Temple of Earthly Venus,* in Duboy, p. 27

The facts are, apparently, that Lequeu was born in 1756 (in Rouen), went to school at the Ecole Gratuite de Dessin, won a few prizes for architecture, and died some time in the 1820s: at which time his papers were anonymously (?) donated to the Bibliotheque Royale (now Nationale). Duboy's ingenious study, as much about Duchamp as it is about Lequeu, is really a Dada chronicle of a Dada mystery. Duboy isn't so much preoccupied with a sober, academic clearing-up of the nebulousness surrounding Lequeu as a fantastically, nearly *impossibly* radical 18th Century architect (he designed buildings such as "The Drinking Den for an Arid Wilderness" and "The Boudoir on the Ground Floor, known as the Temple of Earthly Venus"); rather, Duboy seems bent on stoking the avant-garde fire of modern art studies.

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Img left
Jean-Jacques Lequeu,
Self-Portrait,
in Duboy, p. 10
Img right
Jean-Jacques Lequeu,
Self-Portrait, 1773,
in Duboy, p. 11

Basically, Duboy unmasks Lequeu's obsessive punning (his name itself could be slang for penis); his penchant for the erotic and the absurd (many of his drawings have drawing-room phrases such as: "The young cunt in an attitude of the conjunctions of Venus"); his Rrose Selavy-like alter egos; his detailed, science-minded draughtsmanship; his pathological portraiture etc. as unmistakably Duchampian tropes.

The kicker is that Duboy indirectly proposes a number of theories or plots concerning these awesome similarities. So I suppose the big question is: what was Duchamp really up to for that year and a half that he was employed by the Bibliotheque tionale…? Could there have been a secret society? A sort of Oulipo- or Pataphysics-based conspiracy to infiltrate the library and insert a Lequeu? Were Jacques Lacan, or Raymond Queneau, or even Georges Bataille in on the scam, too?

This note is really just a S.O.S. Can anyone out there save me, tell me what the deal is? Does the Lequeu archive constitute a new wealth of material for Duchamp studies? Or have I been taken: hook, line, and sinker?