The Artist as a Social Critique

A controversy about Duchamp

The following text is based on an interview with Ms. Rhonda Roland Shearer, the founder of the Art Science Research Laboratory located in Soho, Manhattan, New York and her findings about the art of Marcel Duchamp. Ms. Shearer, an artist herself, has concentrated her work completely on the rewriting and manipulation of art history–"I have learned my lesson from Duchamp," she says, and consequently has discarded the object from her work. Ms. Shearer is the initiator of the quarterly online-magazine "Tout-Fait" and is in the process of publishing a book revealing a detailed discussion of her research, which ultimately redefines Duchamp's position in art history. Since Ms. Shearer went public with her ideas, a controversy about the results of her research has broken loose. How can we know what Duchamp's true intention was when he "created" the ready-mades? Is there much more to them than the collection of art history books has repeatedly told us over the decades? The answer lies in the very objects themselves and now that we are well familiar with his work, it might be time to leave old views behind and take a fresh look at it, which is exactly what Ms. Shearer has done.

The text will give a detailed discussion of some famous examples such as the urinal, the hat rack and the coat rack to make visible her ideas and then compare them to the harsh criticism she has received from art historians, several critics of major newspapers and art magazines and then evaluate the arguments. To which side more weight is given will be left to the reader. Additional theoretical and visual material as well as some interactive 3-D models of some of the discussed works can be found in the Multimedia section of Tout-Fait (Vol. 2, issue no. 3) in an article by Ms. Rhonda

Roland Shearer herself.

“Besides: It is always the others who die.”

The role of Duchamp, the French American Dadaist, as a critic of the art world and of the laxness and inattentiveness of our perceptional conventions is today commonly accepted, as well as his witty and critical spirit as it is expressed in many of his quotes and interviews. But now, since Ms. Rhonda Roland Shearer took a more detailed look at the entirety of his work, profounder issues seem to reveal themselves. We need to ask ourselves, if perhaps there was another surprise hidden behind the one we today have so well integrated into our sense of art history and the foundations Duchamp’s invention of the ready-made has laid for later art forms.

“Besides—it is always the others who die”, reads a quote he had inscribed on his gravestone. Does this suggest that we would die or better: the accuracy of our perception, our curiosity, while he would not? The issues hidden in the ready-mades, objects and studio photography, “once discovered indeed would give him a second revival and guarantee his spirit and influence to live on far beyond the fame of his time”.[(1)]Once again Duchamp is holding the mirror for us to realize the blind spots and self contentedness of our perception. “And it was all planned out”[(2)].

Ms. Rhonda Roland Shearer’s findings which seem more and more obvious once the eyes are opened to the deceptions suggest that this indeed is true. Many statements Duchamp made in interviews and his own writings, which are primarily concerned with perceptional research and theories seem to support this theory. Furthermore Duchamp explicitly expresses his interest in a public to come, “you should wait for fifty years or a hundred years for your true public. That is the only public that interests me”, he states.[(3)]Obviously the inventiveness of Duchamp’s spirit was underestimated for the past decades, but not our capacities as supposed by his mind.

Marcel Duchamp sustained a long lasting interest in

mathematics and physics, especially in the theories of Henri Poincaré, the forefather of chaos theory and researcher of geometry. Poincaré "claimed that axioms of geometry are neither a synthetic a priori truth nor an empirical truth and that they are a convention in a disguised form. We choose an appropriate convention in the light of our experience and thus the question is not whether it is true or not but whether it is convenient or simple."[4]

Likewise the objects of our three dimensional world are neither unchangeable facts nor are they clearly consistent with the data we collect through our perceptual experience especially when it comes to two
dimensional representation of three dimensional objects. They happen in the mind, which means when we perceive with our senses, and this is especially true of our eyes, "we build a mental map of the things, a collection of snapshots gathered through movement in time and space. In our mind they fuse together to one idea of an object"[5]we then call fact, but many times it is not.

The potential "gap between the reality of the object outside of us and the object as it exists in our mind as it happens due to our perceptional blind spots are the zone where Duchamp's work sets in".[6]When we perceive we are drawn to the convenient and simple. Duchamp was well aware of all of this, aware of it before anybody else and "his work functions as a set of proof of these findings and the flaws of our visual perception".[7]

click images to enlarge

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- Figure 1
- Figure 2

- Photograph of Duchamp’s studio in New York, 1917-18
- Marcel Duchamp,*Hat Rack*, 1917/1964

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- Figure 3
- Figure 4

- Marcel Duchamp,*Tu m’* (detail), 1918
- Marcel Duchamp,*Hat Rack Blueprint* , 1964

click to see video



Figure 5
A study model
of Hat Rack by ASRL

How huge the gap between the reality of an object and its representation of it in our mind can become we realize when we follow the research of Ms. Shearer about one of Duchamp's well known ready-mades, the hat rack. In our mind as well as in art history books it exists as one single object, while in fact it is not. The documentation of the object, a drawing, studio and object photography, a photograph of its shadow and a blue print **(Figs. 1-4)** reveal that different versions of the object exist and only one of them matches the original Thonet bend wood hat rack as you could buy it in stores of Duchamp's time. The other versions are alterations and distortions (blue print) and one of them even reveals itself as an unusable object as we can see in the little video animation where a research member places hats on the different works and replicas of Duchamp's "ready-made": The lower row of S-shapes is directed downward. **(Fig. 5)** Accurate scientific research with the aid of computer technology has helped to unveil the true nature of the "ready-made".

The hat rack is in fact an object that was altered over time, opposed to the one single object that was just purchased in a department store to then be put on a pedestal and named an object of art. Reality is far more complex. The hat rack is a creation and "what Duchamp means by hat rack can be understood only if we put all versions together"[8], in the mind they meld together and become the second shock of the ready-made, the shock about the incapacities of our "reliable" perception as

the collector of truth.

click to enlarge



Figure 6
Original studio
photograph showing the
Trébuchet [Trap]
on the floor, 1916-17

For Duchamp “our blind spots become the very spots where he can fool us”.[9]Another example is the coat rack. A photography of the object looks like the manufactured one. It sits on the floor of Duchamp’s studio and we see it slightly turned, but what seems to be in perspective is, as a closer look reveals—in fact we have to employ the aids of geometer and lines to find out—that what we look at is a distorted version of the piece: the different hooks all are slightly tilted. A frontal view of the object would disclose its unevenness, but of course put in perspective, we miss it. **(Fig. 6)**

Duchamp hated the retina, for him it was the source of misperception and to rely on it as the only origin for insight in truth and reality finally means to be led astray. Accordingly, as stated in an interview, he expresses his dislike for all art based on the visual alone, e.g. impressionism, and calls it retinal.[10]Already Courbet had introduced the physical emphasis into the painting of the 19th century, while Duchamp approves art that integrates mental images, symbols and allegories, art, that is primarily concerned with ideas.[11]It gives us a broader and more truthful

representation of
how reality is present in our minds.

Cabanne: Where does your antiretinal attitude come from?

Duchamp: From too great an importance given to the retinal. Since Courbet , it's been believed that painting is addressed to the retina. That was everyone's error. The retinal shudder! Before, painting had other functions: it could be religious, philosophical, moral.[12]

In another interview held 1956 Duchamp states: "Painting should not be exclusively retinal or visual; it should have to do with the grey matter, with our urge for understanding".[13] Herein we certainly find the root for his extended research (visual experiments, cast shadows, mirror reflections etc.) and interest in the introduction of the fourth dimension into the representation of objects, which then manifest in his long term project the *Large Glass*. In the Large Glass he no longer uses realistic, but mathematical, scientific
perspective, based on calculations and dimensions. "Everything was becoming conceptional," Duchamp states.[14]

Already the Egyptian art applied time span principles versus the single moment's "photographic-like" representations as later made systematic in Renaissance. Egyptian art shows frontal and side views mixed all in order to convey what is meant; it is a series in time and space, not a one single point, central perspective.

Researching Duchamp's perceptional theories as given in his visual work, two findings seem to become crucial for understanding his point: "Perspective is more than just vision. And: all visual language is based on the mind. The idea of an object is a stack of information and perspective is just one single snapshot taken out of the stack, but incapable of giving us an accurate idea of what the object truly is, in

total. Even if we look or meditate on it for a very long time, it keeps its hidden secrets".[15] We are unchangeably bound to the actual time and space experience, as Kant already stated in his *critique of pure reason*. "Duchamp through his work gives us the visual version of a truly new mathematical system that describes how eye and mind work together".[16]

While cubism is working according to similar principles, the time-space process of perception, it emphasizes the fragmentation of perception through splintering the visual information—Duchamp goes one step further. He places all weight on the process beyond the fragmented snapshot collection and concentrates only on the process of the fusion of the different elements into one single idea.

Many works of his show his interest in optical experiments such as stereo vision, a new way to go beyond photography. A card with two different pictures is placed on a device that allows one eye to see one picture each. Duchamp's system is "working by these very principles, but formally it goes beyond it"[17], since he employs different versions of objects over a longer time period, which leaves us mostly completely unaware of the fact that we are fooled.

Let us for a moment go back to the statement about Poincaré's research on geometry and the conventions in disguised forms: "We choose an appropriate convention in the light of our experience and thus the question is not whether it is true or not but whether it is convenient or simple." We see what we know and convenience probably plays a far greater role in our perception than we would like to admit. How much information do we collect to determine that what we see is a tree, a car, a broom, a human being or a person that we know? The idea, once it is formed in our mind is quite durable and the time spent on attentive and close observation is commonly reduced to a very minimum amount, so many details fail to reach the level of consciousness.

click to enlarge



Figure 7
Photograph of Duchamp's
Fountain (1917) by
Alfred Stieglitz published
in Blindman No. 2,1917

gain we follow Ms. Shearer's research of another famous "ready-made", *Fountain*, the urinal. **(Fig. 7)** Taking a closer view at its depiction, we find that some manipulation must have taken place either on the object or more likely on the photograph. The upper part of the object shows a frontal view, while the lower part is seen slightly in profile. Once this is discovered it seems quite obvious and we ask ourselves how we could not have noticed a grave "mistake" like this before. Three photographs are the only evidence we have of the urinal's existence, because the original object has been "lost". Above that Ms. Shearer's research into manufactured alike objects of Duchamp's time resulted in the finding that urinals in this version were never produced, so there is also the option that Duchamp did have produced and/or altered the object for his own purposes, like the coat rack, a comb, a perfume bottle and many others.

We would not go wrong to call "Duchamp the ultimate manipulator even from his grave".[18] And his witty spirit suggests that "he intended to have art history to be rewritten long after his death. Once again a new belief is forced on us to adopt"[19] and he probably would have a smile of

contentment on his face watching us in the very spot we find ourselves today looking at his work with a new mind through the help of Ms. Shearer's and her
team members' efforts.

But not everyone is willing to embrace the results of her research. Critics of her work find fault in her usage of 3-d rendering and other scientific methods of research as opposed to traditional art-historical methods. Others want to see more visual evidence or assume that she reads facts to her advantage in anticipation of these facts to conform to her theory.[20]Then others simply do not believe her and decline any comment. Is this perhaps another blind spot, the attempt to dwell on conventional methods of research in art history and ultimately the reluctance to give up well known and comfortable beliefs about what art can be and what our perception is capable of? Indeed, if Ms. Shearer is right, then in fact art history has to be rewritten and with its many hundreds and thousands of artists' statements as well.

In another quote Henri Poincaré states: "To doubt everything or to believe everything are two equally convenient solutions; both dispense with the necessity of reflection"[21]. Well, Ms. Shearer hasn't. What do we do?

Notes

Footnote Return 1. Ms. Shearer, interview

Footnote Return 2. Ms. Shearer, interview

Footnote Return 3. A conversation with *Marcel Duchamp*, television interview conducted by James Johnson Sweeney, NBC, 1956

Footnote Return 4. Soshichi Uchii, Notes on Henri Poincaré, in

Philosophy and History of Science, www.bun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/phisci/gallery/poincare_note.html

Footnote Return 5. Ms. Shearer, interview

Footnote Return 6. Ms. Shearer, interview

Footnote Return 7. Ms. Shearer, interview

Footnote Return 8. Ms. Shearer, interview

Footnote Return 9. Ms. Shearer, interview

Footnote Return 10. Dialogues with Duchamp, Pierre Cabanne

Footnote Return 11. Interview with James Johnson Sweeney, *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art, Vol. XIII, 1946*

Footnote Return 12. Dialogues with Duchamp, Pierre Cabanne

Footnote Return 13. *A conversation with Marcel Duchamp,* television interview conducted by James Johnson Sweeney, NBC, January 1956

Footnote Return 14. Dialogues with Duchamp, Pierre Cabanne

Footnote Return 15. Ms. Shearer, interview, see also *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, edited by Michel

Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, *The Brides Veil/The Continuum*

Footnote Return 16. Ms. Shearer, interview

Footnote Return 17. Ms. Shearer, interview

Footnote Return 18. Ms. Shearer, interview

Footnote Return 19. Ms. Shearer, interview

Footnote Return 20. Francis Naumann, in “Did Duchamp deceive us, ARTnews, February 1999, by Leslie Camhi

Footnote Return 21. www.creativequotations.com/one/733.htm

Figure(s) 1-4, 6-7

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