

The Inventor of Gratuitous Time

Introductory Remarks

Robert Lebel, who was born in Paris on 5 January 1901 and who died in Paris on 28 February 1986, was an art expert (1935-), an authority on ancient paintings with the courts of justice and the courts of appeals (1953-), and a writer all of his life.

It was in New York, at “An American Place,” the Alfred Stieglitz Gallery, in July 1936 according to all accounts, that he met Marcel Duchamp, then in the United States to repair the *Large Glass*.

It was again in New York, during the Second World War, when in forced exile, that he wrote “The Inventor of Gratuitous Time,” around 1943-44, “during a period when I was seeing Duchamp nearly every day. The title *Ingénieur du temps perdu* [Engineer of Lost Time] dates from a lot later and I believe that Duchamp was inspired by my title rather than me by his. I had shown him my text a little after having written it.”^(A) This “enchanting and sacrilegious tale in the fullness of a civilization of skyscrapers and elevated railways” (from the back cover flap of the 1977 edition) would be published fifteen years later in the journal, *Le surréalisme, même* (Paris, 2, Spring 1957), with three photos of the Elevated, exactly, ^(B) then seven years later in the book, *La double vue* [suivi de] *L’Inventeur du temps gratuit*, with an etched diptych by Alberto Giacometti and a folding (*The Clock in Profile*, 1964) by Marcel Duchamp (Paris: Le Soleil Noir, 1964); this book received “Le Prix du Fantastique” in 1965.

Lastly, it was around 1949 that Robert Lebel came up with the plan of devoting a book – both biography and catalogue – to

Marcel Duchamp, a book that Lebel would work on in elaborate fashion from the spring of 1953 to the autumn of 1957 and that he would complete and correct in 1958, just as it was translated into English. This book, which would be *the first book*, was preceded and followed by about twenty articles (on Duchamp, but also on Picabia and Duchamp, de Chirico and Duchamp, Breton and Duchamp, Man Ray and Duchamp, etc.) appearing from 1949, exactly, but only some of these articles would be picked for inclusion in the completely redesigned edition of 1985:

– *Sur Marcel Duchamp*, Paris: Trianon Press, 1959; translated into English by George Heard Hamilton, New York: Grove Press, 1959; translated into German by Serge Stauffer, Cologne: DuMont Schauberg, 1962.

– Second American edition, expanded, New York: Paragraphic Books, 1967; second German edition, revised and expanded, Cologne: Du Mont Schauberg, 1972.

– *Marcel Duchamp*, second French edition, revised and expanded but trimmed of its catalogue, illustrations, and layout. Paris: Belfond, collection “Les Dossiers,” [September] 1985.

– Facsimile edition of the 1959 regular edition, expanded with four letters from Marcel Duchamp to Robert Lebel on loose sheets. Paris and Milan, Mazzotta, and Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996.

With Francis Picabia (from 1911), painter and poet; Man Ray (from 1915), painter and photographer; and Henri-Pierre Roché (from 1916), collector and diarist; Robert Lebel would have been, without doubt, *the last accomplice of Marcel Duchamp*. “All for being very good friends, we remained to a certain extent on our guard,” thus did he summarize, at the end of his life, this complicity.

André Gervais

9 April 2000

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A. Robert lebel, letter to André Gervais, Paris, 21 May 1979. "*Ingénieur du temps perdu*" is the title of the new edition, in 1977, of *Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp* [Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp] (1967) by Pierre Cabanne.

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B. In an article on Robert Lebel and Marcel Duchamp (*Critique*, Paris, 149, October 1959), Patrick Waldberg specifies that "the brilliant and curious text by Robert Lebel *The Inventor of Gratuitous Time*, a veritable speculation, in the sense that Jarry heard it," would have been able to be published in the *De Costa encyclopédique*, which had begun being produced in 1946. And he adds, "We easily recognize, in the "inventor" in question, if not Marcel Duchamp in person, at least one of his brothers in spirit."

The Inventor of Gratuitous Time

by Robert Lebel

translated by Sarah Skinner Kilborne (with Julia Koteliansky)

As soon as it was beyond the already mutilated silhouette of the terminus, near the tip of the island, the Elevated penetrated the rail-narrow streets, skimming their iron staircase facades. Front Street...Pearl Street...were covered by it, shut in like long tunnels, and managed beneath, when not shaken from its passing, only the illusive and silent existence of ancient scenery. Boarded up with impregnable shutters or blinded with filth, windows, one after the other, ceased to be openings. Here it was, between the docks of the East River and the skyscrapers of Wall Street, the strange, dead village where everything menacing that came to New York had buried itself, waiting.

I was attracted to this neighborhood and wanted to live there, but the houses were at that point so inhabited that any imaginable tenant would immediately appear suspicious. Nobody

would believe that someone could seriously think about living in these dilapidated buildings, far from the dignity and comfort that is so proffered by urbanite zeal. In vain, I proposed the excuse that I wanted an artistic existence. This argument, which is often accepted and indulged, only provoked additional mistrust and hostility.

Nevertheless, I pursued going door to door. My disappointment of having to deal with some unavoidable failures was amply compensated by discoveries I made inside of the houses that I visited from top to bottom. Sometimes I would walk around for two to three hours without encountering a single human being. It was in the process of exploring one of these buildings that seemed totally abandoned when I came upon the following inscription, in French, on a door:

A. Lorida, Inventeur du Temps Gratuit ["A. Lorida, Inventor of Gratuitous Time"] – This was carelessly written in pen on a sheet of paper attached by two nails.

I had already gone through, on other floors, the office of a navigation company, a print shop and a bath shop, all equally deserted. Thus, I entered without hesitation. It was three o'clock in the afternoon of a weekday.

In the middle of some sort of vast, extraordinarily cluttered warehouse, a totally naked man was executing movements of physical exercise. He turned around and I thought he had to be over fifty, even though his body was still quite svelte. He didn't have any hair and his meticulously clean appearance was surprising in such surroundings. But I was especially struck by his lack of embarrassment. With no thought of covering himself up, or being astonished, or justifying his attire, he considered me calmly and waited for an explanation.

At first, I found nothing to say except for the silly "Are you French?" adding after a pause, "I'm here about your invention."

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He made a sign, permitting me to sit down, but, except for a bed where a very young woman was lying down, there was no place to sit, and so I politely leaned against a crate. "I'm listening," he said. At that moment, the El appeared suddenly level with the windows and everything around us started to shake.

"Sir," I finally answered, as soon as we could hear each other. "I won't try to hide the fact that I'm prodigiously interested in your discoveries, and it's because I couldn't wait to talk to you that I lost my manners and just came in."

"I receive only by appointment," he briefly replied. "Write down your name and address (he pointed to a wall covered with notes and numbers). You'll be invited," and turning his back to me he resumed his exercise.

I received his letter just three weeks later. It was written on a sheet of paper with "A. Loride and Company" in the letterhead. "I warn you," he wrote, "that I'm not a madman, not a mystic, not a philosopher, not a seer, not a poet. I devote myself to positive research and my actions correspond, to a large extent, to the title perhaps a bit too complementary that I have given myself. Engaged in a real enterprise, the practical necessity obliged me to have a professional name. Others call themselves oil kings or first-rate pharmacists. In any case, let me stipulate that our eventual relations can only be strictly commercial. I don't desire any new friends, my eccentricity is my personal matter

and I didn't unintentionally choose this place to retreat to, where only your curiosity and extreme indiscretion could have enabled you to discover me." And he assigned me an interview for a following day.

I made my way there on the El. Many times already, since our first meeting, I had passed by his windows, trying to experience what it would be like to catch him in the act of some telling pose, but, from the compartment of the train, even though it was enough to just barely lean out in order to tap at his glass, I distinguished nothing that permitted any suspicion of his presence.

He greeted me with the same impassivity that I noticed before. He was neither reticent nor warm. Armed with a graciousness that was somewhat distant, he presented himself at this tête-à-tête, from which he was obviously neither expecting nor fearing anything. Elegantly dressed, he courteously guided me through a remarkable disarray of machines, benches, beams, clocks, safes, all the way to the bed which was no longer occupied.

"You've got a lot of equipment," I said, to start a conversation. "Everything you see in this place, or rather in this store, was left here by the previous tenants," he replied. "So, you won't see much belonging to me here, but I prefer these instruments of chance. The diversity of their nature doesn't allow me to limit myself to just one way of thinking, and in this laboratory – where I inventory the resources systematically and, of course, in the wrong way – my imagination exposes itself less to marking time."

"What about time?" I asked.

"I came round to the idea since I adjusted a theory of mine, thanks to the altogether providential gathering in front of me of these three clocks, of which one functions precisely, another irregularly, and another not at all. In the same way,

this see-saw made me revise my views on isotopes and I owe this electric drying machine some unexpected revelations on the pyrrhonian suspension." Then, meeting my gaze, he added sharply, "Most importantly, don't take me for some sort of a thinker. I only try to connect some scattered notions, I pick up the crumbs of great ideas. I hate abstractions. All these machines, deficient for the most part, constantly bring me back to details, to fragmentary verifications, and make me carry out a mental patchwork of happy inconsistency. They impress upon my questioning a concrete form while their eminently fictitious character keeps me from giving up, just like it does for physicians and like it has done, unfortunately, for so many alchemists, to the detriment of the result. Here, I learn to uselessly take advantage of everything. Thus, for me the ineluctable passage of the El assumes a function as fundamental as the cycle of the tides. It expresses with as much perfection the stamp of humanity, but in addition has the immense advantage of keeping the organism in a state of latent exasperation. The ebb and flow merely encourage us to resign ourselves endlessly, while the El directly drives us to revolt against what is presented to us again and again as being our condition."

"What about time?" I insisted.

"We're getting there. Each of us works like a dog, in the hope that our thoroughly full days will eventually lead up to a well-deserved rest. Our era can't help but twin freedom and leisure into a derisive kind of cult, even though the beings who are most satisfied are the most busy, and consequently the most enslaved. Now, it's clear that no progress is within our reach unless we first overcome our compulsion to be actively productive. However, this compulsion, and only this compulsion, continues to dominate our concept of time. Look," he said, grabbing a stick to point at the clocks, "each of these dials shows time in one of its three aspects. For the quasi totality of men, there's only one aspect. The so-called

enlightened individuals might conceive of two, but I'm one of the rare ones to explicitly define the third, to the point where I can, without too much posturing, presume to be its inventor. Moreover, my goal lies less in formulating it theoretically than in giving it a lasting quality. My ambition is to turn it into a real commodity, a simple object to buy and sell, just like those pharmaceuticals whose properties are known only to chemists, but which are nevertheless sold at every counter. That's why I flatter myself being a tradesman rather than a philosopher."

[click to enlarge](#)



He stopped talking, sat down at a machine situated in proximity to the clocks and set the machine in motion, with one foot on a pedal. Soon, some thin wooden sticks began coming out of an open escapement. "Excuse me," he said. "I have to work on a pressing order."

"Would those be your time compressions?" I cried out. I rather imagined that they were crystalline and their appearance, some kind of tablet.

"The symbol is of no importance," he said, continuing to pedal. "I've found that, without having anything to do with it, I've got this device at my disposal which cuts up the kind of logs that my clients, local hardware dealers, are very greedy to have. I was even told that a surrealist sculptor has been using them quite often. But the fact remains that this work hardly requires the amount of attention I'm capable of giving to something I do for a living. I can devote myself to

it without taking my eyes off the first clock and, as easily as I can, from this spot here, watch the El come, pass by and disappear, I can, by that dial, watch Time come, pass by and disappear, Time which is everlasting and venal. The clock's hands, already worn out, turn with a regularity that is nothing but miraculous. It seems as if it is their destiny to turn, no matter what happens. Their good fortune consists in being neither ahead nor behind and, above all, not stopped. We can discern in their clear, resolute, and confident movements, the chauvinistic satisfaction that emanates from the face of an honest servant, a diligent housewife, a conscientious worker, a methodical official, an enterprising businessman, all the people that I see every morning on their way to work, jostling each other in the El, and similarly pushing each other every evening on their way home. Meanwhile, time progresses in front of me like a movie. Sure, I feel like a stranger here. I literally escape here, but is it because of my work schedule which can be considered whimsical? I don't think so. Compare the faces of those I described to you with those who replace them during off-peak hours, when the train is almost empty and just about comfortable. These privileged few who, for generally very questionable reasons, have gotten to be released, far from showing delight, seem, on the contrary and for the most part, anxious and tormented. They carelessly glance through their newspapers, sit upright in their seats, and get irritated by the slowness of the train. In brief, their symptoms are the ones of a morbid rumination."

Interrupting himself suddenly, he pushed the sticks which had been accumulating in front of the escapement out of his way, and then resumed his small operation. "Don't worry," he continued. "My off-peak travelers aren't in any way eaten up by remorse. What's more, the reaction of a privileged person to the enslavement of others is contemptuously expressed by a cynical contentment. No, the explanation is elsewhere. If, like me, you spent several hours each day aiming your binoculars at the El from the height of this Anglican

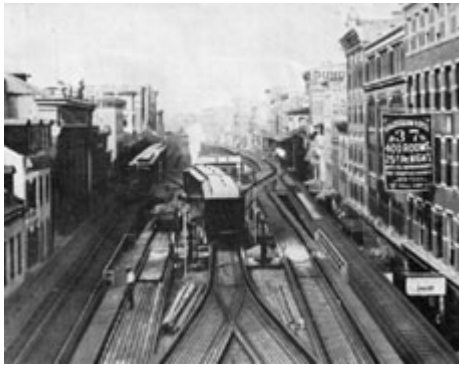
minister's pulpit (it allows me to look at everything without risking detection), you would notice that these passengers are divided into two quite distinct categories. It was a simple problem of interpretation that I solved with the skill of an ethnographer or anthropologist, using an exhaustive comparison of individual characteristics. Those that you espy, in the off-peak hours, smiling, even relaxing, are in reality temporarily removed ants from the big anthill. As they'd say in the office, 'they're running an errand' or as they'd say in the military, with more dignity, 'they're on official assignment.' The serenity, the casualness, which distinguishes them from their immediate neighbors, could have no other explanation. For them, an empty hour is nearly impossible, since society is devoted to filling up time, and *they can't escape that*. Time, in which currency is measured by practice, remains the very glue which binds them to their agitation."

While he was once again clearing away output from his machine, I permitted myself to disagree. "Nevertheless, for those other off-peak commuters, those that you'd still classify after further examination as true people of leisure, what's the explanation of their melancholy if you discard the hypothesis of scruples? Should we resort to the well-worn exploitation of anguish with which our travelers are supposed to be seized before the prospect of being at somebody else's disposal?"

"Not at all," he answered in a bit of a temper. "That would be giving in to the most spectacularly specious argument, the one commonly used to justify social inequalities and prove the validity of servitude by exaggerating both the responsibilities of an idle person and the risks that run a free man. If individuals who achieve a relative independence end up being, in fact, the most helpless and skittish, it's because, while being physically emancipated, they remain mentally enslaved. They don't adjust their notion of time, although time modifies its rhythm for them. Thus, their existence is marked by an imbalance that is aptly mimicked by

this second set of hands. These hands are animated solely by an erratic, sort of feverish movement, interrupted by long moments of heavy stillness. The hands are constantly ahead or behind, but of what, we might ask, since they're set, precisely, outside of the revolutions of punctuality. Where does this inconsistency come from, if not from the very lively consciousness of social time that they manage to keep? When all is said and done, their regret about being deprived of punctuality prevails over their relief from not having to deal with it. A clock that is 'off,' and thence liberated, doesn't forget that it was once an accurate clock. No matter the hour, it will never be totally free of the other whose earlier bell persists stubbornly in ringing and calling up memories."

[click to enlarge](#)



Without stopping the machine, he started to laugh quietly. "You see," he went on, "I will only accept the title 'thinker' if it's used with the word 'comic,' not in the sad sense, but in the way Stendhal envisioned becoming 'the comic bard.' Unlike Molière and his miserable suite of vaudevillian writers, I laugh less about man himself than about the abstractions he's highly conscious of. The comedy of thought is a lot more irresistible than that of character. It's high time we finished with the classic form of comedy and its arsenal of forever withered ideal types, and replace it with a comedy of knowledge that would end with a beautiful butchery of ideas, instead of a routine conclusion which smothers what's 'funny.' For example, I can clearly imagine a comedy

based on the notion of time, that old flirt with her sordid minauderies, tirelessly counting and recounting her gold as it slides through her fingers. She would be the one to astound and trash and leave, as is fitting, with her ideographic configuration. I often like to think that the amazing forms which modern art has been lavished with are ideas which have taken shape and been dressed up for the future where they will be shot down. These are the characters in our new comedy and their appearance, sometimes repulsive at first, only confirms their mythical significance and announces the farcical sacrifice they are destined to make."

The stacks of logs had reached a considerable height, and probably judging the results of his effort to be sufficient, my host stopped pedaling, stood up, pointed at the second clock again and continued. "This time, which has ceased being social and hasn't yet started to be individual, this amorphous, colorless, insipid time represents an intolerable dead weight which we've agreed to call human evolution. Either it is only fantasy, and among the eternally primitive masses, we represent only a negligible dreg of dissent, or, from the very beginning, this evolution reached a deadlock, meeting with a challenge that irrefutably pushes it back. But we should be careful, because the very desire for freedom won't endlessly resist the terrible denial imposed by the facts. The scandalous gap between the words we put forth and our notorious behavior grows bigger every day. Around us, failures begin to happen all at once and the most rebellious sometimes resemble those emancipated women who secretly wish for a tough-minded man. The one thing that's always missing is a cause for dedicating themselves "with all their soul." We have to admit that this social time knows how to keep those who are momentarily outside of it feeling disgustingly nostalgic. Some are at the mercy of the first ambiguous welcome; others, proud of their firmness, write down with a morose refinement the codes of their new constraints. Even the few who put up with being alone pay tribute by way of moaning. They are bored,

they despair or, what's more ridiculous, they work. Every bribe of this time, which they are so painfully aware takes away from society, acquires in their eyes an extravagant value. They personally establish themselves as usurers and, to make their sad savings more fruitful, they calculate, they invent, they build, they paint, they write with a sorry fervor. Without a doubt, they give themselves over to a sort of transference; they convert their paper-time into gold-time, they consolidate, and it's pure instinct to use the language of finance for this mental operation. The matter is only a question of investing for old age or, like the ultimate ambition of a philanthropist, the long-term investor, for a way to survive.

"You see," he said smiling. "I sometimes let satire get the best of me. I stigmatize the modern man, the free man, the one who, like ancient duelists, feels spoiled when accorded the choice of how he'd like to be killed. Follow him in his game as he vacillates triumphantly between newspapers, between professions, between churches. Hear him expressing himself at ease in languages which mix-up rhythm with time, such as the English 'time' or the Italian 'tempo.' Watch him confidently walk away, persuaded that he could stay away if he wants, while he carries within him, more restricting than a love potion, the proof of his submission. Even in the forest where he sometimes ventures, the fairies, the witches, the anonymous voices are just like metaphorical clocks whose function is to remind him of the time. Under his gaze, each surface is a readable dial, each shadow, a watch that awaits in ambush. The agony of the minutes bellows in every echo and the traveler listens to himself grow old, to the point where he is dizzy with anger, because it is time, the inexorable maestro of the interior orchestra, that beats his pulse. To retrace his steps, to search for 'lost time,' what temptation for someone who, having believed he avoided old ground, resumes on his own account the disenchanted exclamation of a famous author: 'It is nothing, I am here, I am still here.'"

For several moments, my eyes had been fixed on the third dial whose unchanging face had begun to fascinate me. "Don't let this inertia inspire facile images of nothingness or eternity," my host told me in a sardonic tone. "On the contrary, imagine within this stopped clock a more sensible mechanism than the others, too 'perfect' for registering the coarse vibrations of social time. Somewhere, in some carefully hidden part of its gears, imperceptible oscillations will reveal the almost impalpable passage of gratuitous time. Of course, the face on this dial, fixed and death-like, is well-made for turning away those who naturally step back from any possible mutation. Everything announces a passage to go through, a rupture to realize. Between this world and the other, there's no legendary transition, no discursive communication. No one offers us the key to some different nirvana because it seems as if, where we're going, ecstasy has no reason to exist. We reunite with nothing and perhaps will have broken with everything. No ceremonial, no incantations, no rites, but reaching the point of lucidity where the notion of time becomes a fruit one can peel," and with his fingers he made these little, nimble movements.

I was burning to ask a question but, getting ahead of me, he added, "Do I need to specify that in removing ourselves from useful time, we don't in any way intend to restrict ourselves to the neutral calm of a spectator, to a skeptical or contemplative transcendence which, as far as I'm concerned, is absolutely repulsive? The domain of gratuitous time is the domain of extreme risk, of sustainable exaltation, for it is, at once, the only one where we consciously lose time and therefore life, and the only one where every dramatic effect, every emphasis is unacceptable. The game itself is stripped of the verbal or passionate compensations bequeathed by social time where no act is justifiable without a dividend. Ancient aristocrats would take the precaution of gathering all their guests before tossing their silverware to the bottom of the water, and various ways to execute, in modern literature, have

kept this showy style. For us, waste is strictly mandated to be not ostensible, and we will try above all to stay above suspicion. We're not magi or heros, dispensers of justice or prophets, but we'll take care to play any roles with a false seriousness in order to create an illusion. It's exactly within social time – not outside of it, which will itself be enlightening – that we'll create, without necessarily meaning to, zones of refusal and lightness."

[click to enlarge](#)



At this point, a young woman entered. She wasn't the one I'd seen before. She just nodded her head and sat down on the bed without saying a word. I was prepared to continue the conversation when I realized that, without a doubt, the thoughts of my colleague had taken a turn.

"May I request something, that you never come back again?" he asked after some minutes of silence. "Spare me the disgrace of resuming these oral demonstrations which only betray our own shilly-shallying. The noise of words claiming they can persuade is enough for the momentarily averted social time to regain its arrogance." And kindly pushing me towards the door, he concluded, "Freedom is never separate from a certain silence. Yes indeed, I have already said too much."